

*...and the greatest of these is love.*

1Cor 13, this has surely got to be everybody's favourite bit of Holy Scripture. *And if I have faith to move mountains, but without love, then I am nothing at all.*

Funerals, weddings, baptisms, it's always the right reading. *Love is always patient and kind. It is never boastful, rude or selfish.* I could almost map out my life on the basis of this wonderful page.

Looking back now at that zealous young man with an early sense of vocation. *Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.., having faith in all its fullness,* waiting to stand up and tell people the Christian message in all its uncompromising fullness, thinking I was a bit of a prophet, a bulwark against liberalism and laxity, even a bit of a martyr, being prepared to *let them take my body to burn it.*

Maybe it takes some kind of crisis for all this zeal to be exposed for what it really is – *If I have all the eloquence of men or of angels, but speak without love, I am simply a gong booming or a cymbal clashing. If I have the gift of prophecy and if I have faith in all its fullness, but without love, then I am nothing at all.* There comes a point when love makes itself known, when love completely overwhelms us, destroys us, when love reduces us to dust and ashes. This is real contrition – that painful discovery that what we are about is not entirely motivated by selfless love.

If prophetic zeal is the first stage of Christian life and the discovery of love the second, then maybe the third step is to begin to penetrate that dim reflection in the mirror, to begin to look into the face of love itself, not just to be a loving person but to begin to enter the Mystery of Love, to see as we are seen, to know as we are known. God knows us through and through. Contemplative prayer is to become more and more aware of that knowledge, until we really do see face to face.

*In short, there are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love. Or as St John puts it: God is Love and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them.*