

Be ambitious for the higher gifts: a lesson in love.

Whenever we listen to today's second reading our minds begin to fill with images of weddings, but somehow I doubt that such images were in the mind of St Paul when he wrote his famous "hymn" to love. No, Paul was much more concerned with the issues and situations that his Corinthian flock had to contend with, and of how to resolve them in the light of the gospel message which he had preached to them. His words still resound powerfully for us too as we wrestle with the challenges of living the Christian life in today's diverse society.

The first thing to note about the passage is that Paul is full of encouragement. His call for us to be *ambitious for the higher gifts* is an affirmation of our status. In other words we are all called to holiness and this must never be forgotten. The dignity and the sanctity of each one of us is a unique quality which shines forth from every person no matter what their status. Each of us is special, and we are to strive to present our qualities as stamps of that holiness. However, Paul is also telling us that the gifts we have will remain unused and unexplored and locked away unless we find the key which opens the door and allows us entry. The key which opens the door is love. I've always taken these words of Paul as a help in examining my conscience and of questioning how I carry out my responsibilities. If we think about our own situations and look to apply Paul's words to them, we experience a real uplifting of our resolve to look into our hearts and express our love in all its fullness through the knowledge of knowing Jesus Christ. So it is to Jesus that we must turn to show us just how love embraces our desire, our concern and our aspiration.

Desire when founded on love enables us to understand our responsibility. We may desire riches and wealth to the exclusion of everything else, and we may set about trying to achieve it, but love invites us to consider what that says about us. Remember how Jesus looked at the rich young man and *loved him*, such love stopped him in his tracks and made him think deeply about what it was that motivated him and his choices in life. Concern when founded on love enables us to understand our duty. We don't live in isolation but we live amongst our neighbours. The story of the Good Samaritan shows us that we cannot ignore the needs of those around us even if they themselves are different from us. Aspiration when founded on love enables us to understand our task. As we look to discover our role in society, we are called to live out our role in the light of the call to service. Remember how Jesus constantly impressed upon those who wished to follow him, that the call to discipleship was integral with the call to *remain in my love*.

We live our life in the *school of love* and our teacher in this school is Christ. The beautiful early Christian Hymn *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est* (Where is love and loving kindness God is there), sung during the liturgy of Maundy Thursday when we celebrate the giving of the new commandment reminds us to love one another as Christ loved us. If our ambition is to live in holiness then the practical application of this ambition is that we wash each other's feet just as Christ washed ours. There can be no more profound an expression of Paul's "hymn" to love than that.