

And now the gifts of faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Were you ever “stood up” in your younger days? When I first met Rita, I asked her out to Tiffany’s night club in Great Yarmouth. On the Saturday night, she put on her best dress and waited. 7.00 pm came and went, 8.00pm arrived: no car or boyfriend. Then Rita’s mum said,

“He’s not coming.” ...

and he wasn’t.

I’d had forgotten. I had asked Rita out, but gone with my mate Mike to the dance without her. Fortunately, Rita was never made to be walked over, and, the following morning, in a phone call, she made her feelings known to me.

I mention this because, after 37 years of happy marriage, it is quite frightening to look back to see how fragile love relationships can be when they first begin.

In this morning’s reading, St Paul is writing about love and it is often read in church to couples whose love is not fragile, but, hopefully, secure. It is the classic wedding text.

And when couples hear those beautiful words, I am sure most see it speaking about their love for one another. But, Paul isn’t writing about earthly love between a man and a woman. Paul is talking about God’s pure love

So, we could substitute “God” for the word “love”.

‘God is patient, God is kind. He does not envy, He does not boast, He is not proud.’ ...and so on.

God is love and He gives us the experience of love as a foretaste of being with Him. Or, put another way, the love human beings experience is a reflection of God’s love for us just like moonlight is a reflection of the sun’s power and brightness.

Today is Candlemas, when we focus on Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus’ visiting the temple for Mary to experience the customary ritual cleansing after child birth. However, it is not the ceremony that captures our heart, but the encounter with the elderly couple, Simeon and Anna.

Candle

Simeon, the priest, has the Spirit upon him or, in other words, God’s love had touched him. Simeon had been told by God that he wouldn’t die until the Messiah came.

And then Simeon takes the light of the world – Jesus – God’s love in human form, in his arms. And Anna, an elderly lady with a prophetic gifting, is there too. And all that she believed would happen has come true before her eyes. Simeon and Anna can now die in peace – their ministry has been fulfilled.

But as they move to be with the God of love, what do Anna and Simeon take with them?

Nothing. When we die we take nothing with us – surely? Well Paul hints that may not be fully true.

So what gifts do Simeon and Anna have, that could pass through death with them? Let's go back our text:

“And now the gifts of faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Both Anna and Simeon have the gift of faith. Both believe. The Bible says that Anna never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying and that Simeon was righteous and devout.

But the gift of faith is not needed in heaven. Why would you need faith when you are experiencing Jesus face to face? Faith cannot exist without doubt. If you are in heaven with Jesus, you will know that God exists so, logically, it follows that the gift of faith will disappear.

So what about the gift of hope. Simeon hoped that he would see the Messiah before for he died and Anna prophesied that she would also. All of us hope that when we arrive in heaven, we will meet Jesus face to face. But once you are in heaven, there is nothing further to hope for, so, again, the gift of hope will disappear.

So we leave faith and hope on this earth when we die but there is a final greater gift.

St Paul said:

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So why is love greater than faith and hope? Surely, it is because love is the only gift that we can take with us to heaven. If God's love is in our soul, we have the very essence of what God is, within us now and throughout eternity.

But God's love within has to be discovered through an awakening by the Holy Spirit. And just like the beginning of human love relationships, that love awaking can be very fragile at first.

When, in my small bedroom, I took a Bible off the shelf, read John's gospel and said a prayer asking Jesus into my life, I felt very fragile. I tried to pray for my friends but all I could say was their names. I needed to be nurtured and fortunately I was. Soon, with the support of other Christians, I was growing in faith and hope, but, above all, I had found God's greatest gift– I experienced His unconditional love.

But what does God's unconditional love really mean?

Let me illustrate by telling you about a little seven-year-old boy called Ryan. Ryan was in mainstream schooling but had special educational needs. He was accepted

by his classmates but he struggled to make any friends. One day, he heard about St Valentine's and how people sent special cards to those they loved. Ryan decided to make a valentine's card for every child in his class. It took an immense effort and Ryan's mum, Beth, was really worried. She just knew no one would send Ryan a Valentines card from school. She worried that he would feel hurt, rejected, fragile and unloved. Feb 14th came and Ryan took his cards to school. Beth saw him come out and expected to see him run to her in tears. This was going to be a tough evening. But no. Ryan ran to his mum full of excitement.

"Guess what, Mum? I gave all my Valentine cards to my class. And I remembered them all. I didn't miss anyone out and everyone said 'thank you'.

God is like that little boy. God doesn't need our love to be returned because He is full of love. What God desires from us is that we accept his love, his gift to us, his love invitation, his Valentine's card.

If we do that, if we accept the love of God in our lives, God's love gift passes through death and remains in our soul's for ever. There is nothing fragile about that.

So, have you accepted God's love card? Can you feel Him in your heart? If it is all a bit fragile, why not go for prayer after the service in St Anne's chapel and ask to be filled with God's love?

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