

What's this thing called love?

I saw you there
One wonderful day
You took my heart
And threw it away
That's why I ask the lord
In heaven above
What is this thing
Called love? Cole Porter, 1929

In 1929 the stage musical, *Wake up and Dream*, hit both the West End in London, and Broadway. It was described as having a *book*, that is, a storyline, that was thread bare, but it did have 24 sets and 500 costume changes. From all accounts, it was quite spectacular! Only one song remains famous from the entire show, and that was the lament sung at the beginning of the second act.

A jazz standard now, played in various styles from melancholy to upbeat, Cole Porter's *What is this thing called love* has passed into the folklore of popular music. If you know the song, you may have heard it sung by many voices over the last century – Georges Metaxa, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, Nat King Cole, Billie Holiday, Bing Crosby, the seductive Ella Fitzgerald, and even ol'blue eyes himself, Frank Sinatra. Each one has crooned those marvellous words *That's why I ask the Lord in heaven above, What it this thing called love?*

Of course, in the musical revue, the words sing of love lost. *I saw you there one wonderful day, you took my heart and threw it away.* Ahh...like most love songs, why do they have to be so sad? The book does give a spectacular and bizarre ending with the finale showing the lead character spurning love and preferring a life of dalliance. It was no secret that Porter wrote the song for the London lead out of spite.

Love: it's risky stuff. We talk about it. We read about. We know all about. We look for it. We are hurt by it. And we make up with it. And now, today, we're told, *love came down and dwelt among us.* The Word made flesh, Jesus, the greatest gift of all, *love.*

So, what is this gift that people seem to talk about, but seldom seem to find it?

I'll give you a clue. It's hidden inside this present. It's nicely wrapped and beautifully presented. Here it is. It's a gift for you and me: and it's no longer a concept or quest, it is reality. It is tangible. Here it is...but what is it?

On Thursday, when the Macedon Primary School were in Church for their Christmas Concert and Prayers, I chose not to have a reading about the Nativity scene: that story was there in all the songs. We know the story so well that most of us can easily sit and tell it to one another. No, rather than telling that story, I jumped through to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. There, in chapter 13, Paul tells us quite clearly what he thinks love is. The version I chose was Eugene Peterson's *The Message*.

We often hear this read at weddings. Listen afresh to the qualities of love.

1 If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. 2 If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. 3 If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. 4 Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, Doesn't have a swelled head, 5 Doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first," Doesn't fly off the handle, Doesn't keep score of the sins of others, 6 Doesn't revel when others grovel, Takes pleasure in the flowering of

truth, 7 Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end. 8 Love never dies.

It's a wonderful list of qualities. Never-ending, cares, not envious, not proud. Love doesn't keep a list of people who act against you. Perhaps, there is a message there in modern politics: love doesn't write down the names of those who vote against you, and then threaten to take away their aid.

The qualities are there to see, but are we any closer to knowing what love is?

God decided to show us what love is. Born into abject poverty, in an outdoor animal shelter, with only bits of rags to wrap her child, Mary gave birth to a son. Keeping with the words of the angel to him, Joseph accepted this son as his own. He didn't abandon the one he loved, nor the child she bore. Joseph, true to the prophecy of the angel, named him *Jesus*, which means, God saves.

Love had a form. It was a new born child struggling for existence, and laid in a manger. All we need to know about love was in that very presence of God. It was a dependence on Mary and Joseph to provide and nurture him that brought out the best in them, and the best in him.

To have love is one thing, to live it is our daily challenge. Jesus, the Word made Flesh, and lover of all, gave, gave and gave. There were times, as we know, he would be frustrated with people: *We're there not another 9?* He got stroppy: after arriving in Jerusalem for the Passover, he angrily turned over the stalls in the Temple markets. He argued with those who should know better; he challenged those who thought they had a right to be in heaven.

And even when he encountered people who knew better but couldn't do things, like the rich young man who had everything but needed to know his place in God's kingdom, Jesus looked at him and loved him, knowing that to give all to the poor was a tough ask. He kept giving in love, even when there was a struggle to live it.

Today, it is that gift of love we ponder. It's in the box. It's real. What does it look like?

Well, I don't know. I'm not sure if I can bring myself to fully look love in reality at the moment. St Paul continued his writing about love by saying

When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good. 12 We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us! 13 But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

Faith. Hope, Joy, Peace, and now, LOVE. The candles of Advent and Christmas mingle into one. It's that we don't see things clearly just yet. It's okay that we cannot yet see love face to face. What is this thing called love?

Today, we give that love another name. Jesus. And all we are asked is to believe and share the love that we receive. And even more importantly, open our hearts to receive the love of others into our lives. It's risky. It may have a cost. It may even hurt or change us. But a life without that risk – can we afford to not to take the chance?

So let's join in that Cole Porter song that knows that when love comes into the world, it was a wonderful day, and we can only, like Mary and Joseph gazing at the new born Christ-child, wonder – full of awe and ponder at what gift this is to us.

May your faith lead to the hope and reality of joy and peace that love is made one with you all this Christmas.