There are two parts to today’s reading from the letter to the Ephesians. The first speaks in more general terms about what it means to be a Christian, while the second part offers a Christian interpretation of certain patterns of family life which were largely taken for granted at the time. Although the text goes on to speak of the relation between children and parents, slaves and masters, the passage we heard focuses on the relation between husband and wife.

The world out of which the Bible comes was patriarchal. Its attitude to the relation between husband and wife is summed up in the encouragement here to wives to be “subject to their husband in everything.” Paul accepts this kind of relationship as part of the natural order, as he accepts the existence of slavery. What he tries to do is to give it a new meaning, to transform it to some degree by applying to it aspects of Christian faith. “Husbands,” he says, “love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” The relationship between husband and wife he describes as a great mystery, a mystery rooted both in creation and in the all embracing mystery which is salvation in Christ.

The sentence that immediately precedes the passage on the family, coming where it does invites us to rethink what is said about the relation between husband and wife in the light of it. “Be subject to one another,” Paul says, “out of reverence for Christ.” There is a mutuality in marriage that must be respected and fostered. Both parties are made in the image and likeness of God, endowed with the same fundamental dignity and rights, called to be disciples of Jesus, and destined for eternal life in God.

There is a saying in the first part of today’s reading which sums up the mystery of Christ in a few words. Although it has implications for all believers, it speaks in a special to families. “Be imitators of God as beloved children,” the apostle urges us, “and live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Paul focuses his preaching on the death and resurrection of Jesus. He sees his death less as something that others did to him and more as something that he freely embraced out of love for us. He interprets the self-giving love that defined not only the death of Jesus but also his life as a sacrifice, as an act of perfect worship into which we are invited to be caught up.

Love is never static. We are either growing in love or the opposite. The kind of love of which the New Testament speaks involves seeking the good of the other, caring about them, coming to their aid, affirming and building them up, not tearing them down. Authentic love tends over time to take root in us. When it does, it has the capacity to transform us from within. We begin to understand what it means “to live in love.” As our love for one another and especially for those closest to us deepens, it opens us in a new way to the love of God – God’s love for us and our love for God.

In the passage assigned for today’s liturgy, Paul describes love as kind, tender-hearted and forgiving. In his famous hymn to love, he says that it is “Patient and kind, not envious or boatful or arrogant. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.” In drawing up this particular list of love’s characteristics, Paul is thinking of the terrible effects the lack of such love can have on the community of faith. The same is true of the family.

The Second Vatican Council introduced the idea of the family as the domestic church. I have always understood this to mean that all that the church is and offers should have a special significance for families and for our relationships to one another in the family.

The family today, our families, takes many forms, some more challenging than others. Whatever form a particular family takes, it is open to being enriched by the gifts that are ours in Christ.