

A Reflection for All Saints' 14. 2. 2021.

Dear Church Family, and Choir,

When you read this, it will be Valentine's Day. Over the years Valentine's Day has evolved into what is, for most people, a purely secular celebration. February the 14th is a day when lovers give and receive cards, flowers, and perhaps share a celebratory meal.

I wonder how many of you know the story of St Valentine? I was unaware of his origins until I researched him for a primary school assembly, some years ago. I can still remember, however, the great competition at my girls' boarding school as to who had the most Valentine cards. It was never me! In those days although we could usually guess their provenance, they were unsigned, and there was much debate as to the author of the coveted cards.

In the third century AD, the Roman Empire was ruled by Emperor Claudius, or Claudius the Cruel, due to his harsh and tyrannical reign. Claudius believed that recruitment for the army was poor because the Roman soldiers didn't want to leave their loved ones in order to fight for the Emperor. So he duly cancelled all marriages and engagements. Thousands of couples saw their hopes of matrimony dashed by this tyrannical edict. But despite the Emperor's orders, a simple Christian priest called Valentine came forward, and secretly married many soldiers before they went into battle.

In AD 269, Claudius discovered the secret ceremonies. He had Valentine thrown into prison and gave orders that he be put to death. As Valentine was awaiting his death, he fell in love with the jailer's daughter, who happened to be blind. On the eve of his execution he wrote her a sonnet, signed 'Your Valentine'. As he had no writing materials available, it is said that he wrote the lines in ink squeezed from violets. Legend has it that his words of love restored the girl's sight.

One source suggests that there were two or three Valentines living in the third Century who were martyred for their faith. But we are concerned with the one who sacrificed his life so that young people could be joined in Holy Matrimony. For decades his story continued to be legendary in the Roman Empire.

Eventually he was granted sainthood, and the Catholic Church created a Feast day in his honour. They chose February 14th as the day of celebration because they believed that love -birds, owls and doves begin to mate on that day. The concept of Valentine's day is founded on love within marriage. It is an official feast day in the Anglican Communion and the Lutheran Church.

Had we been having a Church Service today, Zoom or otherwise, the one reading set would have been the very famous one from 1Corinthians Chapter 13, verses 1 to 13, when St Paul sets out the stall for the inimitable qualities of love, or "agape" in the Greek.

Appropriately enough, this is often the Bible reading chosen for weddings.

It concludes, "Faith, Hope, and Love. But the greatest of these is love."

I have spent a bit too long on St Valentine, but I should like to spend a few minutes on the huge topic of love.

It is difficult to be brief about the subject of love as there are so many aspects to it. In one of Fiona Castle's anthologies entitled 'Let Me Count the Ways',

each chapter has a heading about a different type of love. Chapter 1: Love; chapter 2: God's Love for Us; 3: Our Love for God; 4: Romantic Love; 5: Love lost; 6: Family Love; 7: Love for Animals; 8: Friendship Love; 9: Love for life; and 10: Sacrificial Love.

In another anthology I found this anonymous piece entitled 'Love is Friendship'

"Love is friendship that has caught fire. It is a quiet understanding, mutual confidence, sharing and forgiving. It is loyalty through good times and bad. It settles for less than perfection and makes allowances for human weaknesses. Love is content with the present, it hopes for the future and doesn't brood over the past. It's the day-in-day-out chronicles of irritations, problems, compromises, small disappointments, big victories and common goals. If you have love in your life, it can make up for a great many things that you lack. If you don't have it, no matter what else there is, it is not enough."

During these difficult and uncertain times, when even the most emotionally balanced people are finding aspects of life as it has to be lived at present, very stressful, and often lonely; friends are more important than ever. Facetime and zoom and telephone calls are a poor substitute for meeting face to face, but they can, literally, be a lifeline.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we know that Love is the most important thing in this world, and the next. We believe, mostly because Jesus Himself brought us the message, that His Heavenly Father, was and is, a God of unconditional love, and that wherever love is shown God is present.

There is so much more to say, but I should like to end with a true account of a most moving example of perfect and unconditional love. Dr Robert Seizer, in his book 'Mortal Lessons: Notes in the Art of Surgery', tell a remarkable story of performing surgery to remove a tumour in which it was necessary to sever a facial nerve, leaving a young woman's mouth permanently twisted in paralysis.

In Dr Seizer's own words:

“Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze and touch each other so generously, passionately? The young woman speaks. ‘Will my mouth always be like this?’ She asks. ‘Yes,’ I say, ‘it will. It is because the nerve was cut.’ She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. ‘I like it,’ he says. ‘It is kind of cute.’ All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with God. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I, so close, can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.”

The prayer used as a daily meditation from the Centre for Action and Contemplation:

O Great Love, thank You for living and loving in us and through us. May all that we do flow from our deep connection with You and all beings. Help us to become a community that vulnerably shares each other's burdens. Listen to our heart's longings for the healing of our world.
(Here you may add your own intentions)

Knowing that You are hearing us better than we are speaking, we offer these prayers in all the holy names of God, Amen.

May you all keep safe, and know the healing power of Christ's love.

I send you all my warmest good wishes, Sarah.