

A Valentine Message

It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ

(2 Corinthians 4:6)

It is the Creator God, who at the beginning said, "Let there be light", who has shown us his glory in the person of Jesus Christ.

It was his unshakable belief that Jesus Christ was the visible image of the invisible God that brought a certain Valentinus to a martyr's death on the Flaminian Way in Rome in AD 269. More than 2 centuries later, in 496, Pope Gelasius honoured him by establishing his feast day on February 14. What we know about this Valentinus? Only for certain that he was a presbyter of the church in Rome. A quite early tradition says that he ministered to persecuted Christians in prison and, by his prayers, restored the sight of the blind daughter of his gaoler.

How is it then that this martyr is completely forgotten by most people today, and his feast day is viewed as an opportunity for celebrating *romantic love*? A few points:

- By establishing St. Valentine's day on February 14 Pope Gelasius intended to replace the existing pagan feast of Lupercalia with its fertility rites, its pairing of men and women by lottery etc.
- But one cannot deny the change of the seasons! February 14 in the old Julian calendar of that time is equivalent to February 23 in the more accurate Gregorian calendar that we follow today. February 23 is very near the beginning of spring and interest in mating is stirring in the world of nature!
- The earliest known association of Valentine's day with romantic love in our literature appears to be in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* written to honour the 1st anniversary of King Richard II's engagement to Anne of Bohemia (both aged 15). A modern English version of Chaucer's Middle English runs:

For this was on Saint Valentine's Day
When every bird comes there to choose his match
(Of every kind that men may think of!),
And that so huge a noise they began to make
That earth and air and tree and every lake
Was so full, that not easily was there space
For me to stand – so full was all the place.

- Formal messages or 'valentines' began to appear in the 16th C.
- By the 18th C in this country couples were expressing their love to each other by giving presents, flowers and cards... which has continued up to this day. In Italy they go one better: 'San Valentino keys' are given 'as a romantic symbol and an invitation to unlock the giver's heart!' (*Thank you, Wikipedia!*)

The question we Christians may ask is: is this change of focus to celebrating romantic love on February 14 likely to be acceptable to God? I'm inclined to think it is, particularly as we know so little about St. Valentine. The God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness!' (cf. Gen. 1:3) also said,

- 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of all kinds' (Gen. 1:24).
- 'Let us make man in our image' (1:26), and
- 'It is not good for man to be alone' (2:18).

If Jesus could eat and drink with the people of his day, take part in a wedding celebration and so on, so we surely can join in Valentine fun which is not excessive or hurtful.

When I was bachelor Rector of Barming in Kent I was not at all interested in St. Valentine's Day and tried to treat it just like any other day. But not all my parishioners felt the same! I began to receive Valentine cards - like this one...! Sometimes two! I never knew for sure who sent them, though I had my suspicions. Whoever was responsible had a great laugh!!

Married people may be lucky enough to receive cards like this...! And flowers and chocolates, and share in a special meal today... It would be good if we who do so were later willing, from time to time, to offer hospitality to one or two people who live alone. I was so grateful, as a bachelor Curate in Stoke Bishop and later Rector elsewhere, to be invited out to Sunday lunch and Christmas dinner.

Finally, let me share with you a few statements of the great 4th C preacher John Chrysostom, from his sermon on Ephesians 5:22-33, where St. Paul instructs husband and wife to model their relationship on that between Christ and the Church. John, a celibate priest and former hermit, yet speaks very positively about marriage and how to strengthen it:

- 'There is nothing which so welds our life together as the love of man and wife.'
- 'Seek the things that please God, and those which please man will follow soon enough.'
- 'Pray together at home and go to church; when you come back home, let each ask the other the meaning of the readings and the prayers.'
- To husbands, 'Finally, never call (your wife) by her name alone, but with terms of endearment, honour and love.'

Homily 20 on Ephesians

May God bless us all, single or married, on this St. Valentine's Day as we say with St. Paul (end of today's epistle):

It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ

and we seek to serve him day by day.

