

Corona Season (14.2.21)  
Next Before Lent – *St Valentine*

## DWELL IN MY LOVE

*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Dwell in my love.*

JOHN 15.9

‘Dwell in my love.’ St Valentine’s Day with its emphasis on romantic love and courtship, anonymous cards, messages in newspapers, and candlelit suppers strikes a different note – more about falling in love than remaining in love. But either way, at first sight this Day seems to have little connection with the saint whose life it celebrates.

There were two Valentines; both were Christians and both were martyrs, and neither had any connection with courting couples or romantic love. The most likely reason St Valentine’s Day became a celebration of love was that February 14th fell the day before the pagan Roman festival of Lupercalia on February 15th. Lupercalia honoured the god Lupercus who protected the flock from wolves, but it was also a fertility festival, and in the fifth century Pope Gelasius decided to Christianise it as a celebration of marriage – it was only later that it became a celebration of romance. While romantic attraction between men and women existed in the fifth century, the Church had little to offer in interpreting its place in God’s purposes, and the theme of the Pope’s festival was purification, not celebration.

This was consistent with the early Church’s generally negative attitude towards sex, and its view that marriage was for those who hadn’t the moral strength to remain celibate. Marriage and sexual

love were understood in terms of procreation, and romance was overshadowed by a stern sense of moral duty, and so long as marriage was the only relationship between men and women that was socially acceptable, the Church lacked an incentive to think more deeply about the divine purpose of love and marriage.

We live in different times. The widespread acceptance of alternative life-styles, easier divorce, and especially the growth in psychological understanding, have prompted Christians to think more deeply. The result of this rethinking became clear in the new Marriage Service promulgated in the late 1970s. The much more positive view it offered is very apparent when the teaching about marriage in the *Prayer Book* and the *Alternative Service Book 1980* are compared.

The *Prayer Book* of 1662 teaches that marriage was ordained as a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication, that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

The *Alternative Service Book 1980* says that marriage is given that with delight and tenderness husband and wife may know each other in love, and through the joy of their bodily union may strengthen the union of their hearts and lives.

The change represents nothing less than a revolution in Christian understanding. Marriage is no longer 'a remedy against sin', but a participation in the creative work of God – not just in the gift of children, but also and more deeply in personal growth and mutual support of the partners. Marriage is a sustaining and healing relationship given that we may grow in love – not simply in romantic feelings, but in self-giving and mutual understanding.

Consistent with this, the Church now presents a positive view of commitment: no longer is this simply the expression of duty – though that must not be forgotten; more importantly, commitment is the means of the growth, both personally and spiritually, that lies at the heart of marriage. Marriage gives us a partner who shares our life, who keeps us going in good times and bad, rejoicing in our joys and sharing our sorrows. As St Paul said, ‘there is nothing that love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope and its endurance.’ (1 Cor 13.7) This is to love another as God loves us. It is, in Jesus’ words, to dwell in his love.

At its heart, dwelling in the love of Jesus is to learn both to give and to receive forgiveness, to learn, in St Paul’s words, that ‘Love is patient and kind. Love envies no one... is never selfish, never quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs, takes no pleasure in the sins of others, but delights in the truth.’ There is no doubting the challenge in what Paul says, but at the same time there is deep hope. To grow we need the committed love of another, one who will love us as God does, ‘for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health.’ Intimacy is both the sign and the seal of such a committed relationship. And in times when intimacy is socially acceptable in a wider range of personal relationships, the uniqueness of marriage is seen in the public nature of the commitment undertaken. It was well summarised by the Bishops of the Church of England in their teaching document on Marriage: ‘[While] there is a great deal in our culture which discourages us from making binding and public promises... the promises are liberating. Through them we focus our intentions, and offer one

another a future in a way that we could hardly dare to do otherwise.'

We seem to have discovered – or re-discovered – what God purposed for marriage from the beginning when both women and men were created in his own image and likeness to dwell in his love and experience a foretaste of heaven. It is Jesus, above all, who shows us what the love of God is like in his own self-sacrifice. Self-giving is the highest expression of love; it's what we see in those we celebrate as saints and martyrs, so maybe the festival of a martyr, like Valentine, is actually an appropriate day to celebrate marriage.

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