

Dear Friends,

February sees a number of notable days in the Christian calendar, including Candlemas (which has been written about in these pages before), and Ash Wednesday, which is, of course, the beginning of the six or so weeks of Lent. But ask anyone who is not a regular at church something that happens in February and you might just get Pancake Day as an answer, but more likely Valentine's Day!

February is the month of love (lurve!).

Very little is known of the real St Valentine, but is believed to be a 3rd century Christian martyr. Also, very little is known regarding the reasons for the association of St Valentine's Day with romantic love; the current theory is that the mediaeval English writer Geoffrey Chaucer made it up!



So, somehow, St Valentine is now associated with romantic love. But what does love truly mean to Christians?

Around St Valentine's time - i.e. the very early centuries of the Church - an historian from the Roman Empire called Tertullian, who grew up as a typical Roman pagan believing in the Roman gods, became a Christian. In his writings, one of his most famous sayings is an observation that Roman society noticed that there was something different about Christians: Tertullian reported that the Romans would exclaim, "See how they love one another!" Despite the possible dangers of being a Christian in Roman society at the time, people were attracted to this and the church grew.

Another early Christian historian from about a century earlier - Justin Martyr - described the out-working of Christian love this way: "We who used to value the acquisition of wealth and possessions more than anything else now bring what we have into a common fund and share it with anyone who needs it. We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies."

And St John the Evangelist, about 2 generations earlier still, wrote in a letter to the church: *This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another. If we love our brothers and sisters who are believers, it proves that we have passed from death to life. But a person who has no love is still dead. Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God. (1 John 3:11, 14,18-19)*

And this itself is a recapitulation of what Jesus himself said: *I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. (John 15:11-12)*

Love is way beyond an excuse for buying balloons and roses (odd combination, when you think about it!). It is the absolute core of the Christian faith. It is not a feeling, but a decision. A virtue to be practised.

- **It is for our own good - it will fill us with joy!**
- **it is the best, most effective, witness to people who don't have Christian faith**
- **and it is the only commandment that Jesus gave his disciples**
- lots of other teachings, but this is the only commandment.

To love in the same way Jesus loves will be costly, because it requires us to give of ourselves, but the benefits of such love are incomparable.

Let your life be filled with Love. Let the perfect Love of God cast out all fear from your life. Let the endless Love of God fill your heart to overflowing with joy.

This is my prayer for you all this February and always, in the name and love of Christ. Amen.

Sarah