

God Is Love – reflection for St Valentine’s Day

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us.

God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.

1 John 4:7-12; 16a

I wonder how many photos of people you love are displayed around your home? Why not go and count, you might be surprised! It’s heart-warming to be surrounded by the people we love in this world and the next: grandchildren, godchildren, children, nieces and nephews, partners, parents and friends. Of course, many of us have pictures on our phones, computers and ipads too. Photos of those we love weave us together across the generations and down the years. Usually they are reminders of happy times - people, places and moments that have been captured to be remembered and enjoyed.

This Sunday is known in the Church as the Sunday next before Lent. Lent begins on Wednesday. But it is also of course St Valentine’s Day and hearts, cards, chocolates, red roses and take-away meals for two are in demand, irrespective of lockdown restrictions.

There are all sorts of stories about St Valentine. It is thought that he was a priest, perhaps even a bishop, who was martyred in Rome in about 269. But we’re not entirely sure why the celebration of St Valentine’s Day came to be connected with love. One legend suggests that Valentine was caught officiating at Christian weddings which had been forbidden by the Emperor. In particular, Valentine officiated at the weddings of young men who otherwise would have been conscripted into the army. He cut hearts out of parchment to remind the men not only of the vows they had taken, but also of the fact that God loved them. As the centuries passed, people began to pray to St Valentine in search of romance. So it was perhaps that St Valentine’s day became associated with hearts, romance and love.

Whatever the truth or not of the legends that surround him, what is clear is that Valentine was martyred for his love of Jesus Christ lived out in service of others. It was Valentine’s love for God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Christ that led to his death.

Which brings us to our bible reading.

‘Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us.’

(1 John 4: 11)

There are many different expressions of love, both romantic and platonic. What, I wonder, is your preferred language of love? Do you like to express your love for someone with a kind gesture or with a gift, with loving words or with a hug? Or to put it another way: do you like someone to show you that they love and care for you by cooking you a meal or offering to do your shopping, giving you a bunch of flowers, writing you a card or picking up the phone for a chat?

Our bible reading states that God is love. Hear again the words of the wonderful verse that we usually share at the start of every wedding service: 'God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.' (1 John 4:16a) This is true of all kinds of human love, love that is a reflection of God's great love for each and every one of us regardless of sex, race, age, gender, sexuality, economic status or nationality. Yet as Christians, we know that we turn from God's love letting ourselves down, one another down and God down too. All too often we fail 'to live in love' as a Christian community. Time and again we repent of this failure. In the words of the absolution that we hear in our service, we ask God to forgive our sin and 'draw us back to love, through Jesus Christ our friend and Saviour.'

This weekend sees the launch of Hempsted Hearts, a project initiated by our new Children and Families worker, Rachel Laughton. You might like to follow the project on Facebook, #HempstedHearts or look out for the logo which is on the front of this week's *Praying at Home*. Thank you to those of you who are busy knitting hearts, sewing hearts and even making wooden hearts too! Lots are needed as children and families search for hearts in the streets and green spaces of our village during the weeks of Lent. Each heart has a gift tag that says *You are loved – a gift from St Swithun's*. The hearts can be taken home and hung in the window, given to someone else or hidden again. In a very simple but visual way, we are seeking to share something of God's love across our community. We are continuing or even beginning a conversation all about God who is love.

There is a popular children's book by Sam McBratney. Its title is *Guess How Much I love You?* As we journey through Lent towards the events of Holy Week and Easter, we might wish to hold that question in our prayers as we reflect on our love for God and God's love for us. As our bible reading reminds us:

'God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.' (1 John 4: 10)

In the words of the great hymn that we sing on Good Friday, *When I survey the wondrous cross*: 'Love so amazing so divine, demands my soul my life my all.'

Thank you, St Valentine.

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