

Sermon – St Valentine’s Day – the Sunday next before Lent – 14th February 2020

I think if you asked us here at Truro cathedral to come up with a nice theological word to describe the ministry that we have, I think the word we might settle on would be ‘incarnational’. Before that sends too many of you reaching for a dictionary – you can get to the meaning by simply for a moment recalling what the incarnation of Jesus is about. It is about God not wanting to be distant from the human plight but coming and sharing in it – and thus our incarnational ministry is not about standing aloof from the world, but rather being embroiled in it. Discovering God in the day to day and naming him.

When I was interviewed for my job here, I said then, that the view from the train as you pull into Truro station spoke to me profoundly of the incarnation. That view sees the cathedral dominating the cityscape, but not as something distant from it, but rather in the midst of it - the church very much in the world.

Today, is a church meets world day. A day when the church is doing one thing while the world is perhaps doing another – the question though arises that if we are to be incarnational, we might somehow always be on the look out to find a dialogue between them - because such dialogue can help us and inform us as we continue to walk on the journey of our lives. It can at the same time provide us with an opportunity for a conversation with that world out there that we find ourselves sitting in the midst of.

As I have said in the brief note in the order of service and as I offered in my vlog trailer a little earlier in the week – as far as the church is concerned today is Quinquagesima Sunday, the day 50 days before Easter, but only if you count both Sundays, today and Easter Day in your calculation. In the common worship lectionary, we give it the snappy title ‘The Sunday next before Lent’. That said, you would have to be in particularly nerdy Church company to expect that as answer if you were to simply ask the question – ‘What is today, the 14th February’.

The vast majority of people would want to immediately tell you that this is of course St Valentine’s Day – the great marketing fest of romance – the day when your secret admirer might just send you a note pledging their anonymous affection. At the same time, it has become a moment when we do send notes of appreciation and presents of affection to those we are romantically involved with - and it doubles as an opportunity to give both chocolatiers and florists one of their more profitable days.

But where did that all come from – has it got anything to do with a Valentine at all. I wish the answer was an easy one, but honestly it is not. There are stories of more than one Valentine in the early church and there seems to be a common story that the named saint was martyred for his faith sometime in the 4th century. That martyrdom in part might have been in connection with his performing Christian weddings for Roman soldiers – something that was at the time banned – an obvious connection with romantic notions there. There is also a strong legend that Valentine cured the blind daughter of his jailer before he lost his life, and left her a note as he went to that death addressed ‘From your Valentine’. In doing so he thus provided the script for many a ‘billet -doux’ from that day to this.

Valentine’s day, as something to celebrate, apparently became a thing in the medieval realm of courtly love - but this in part might just relate to the timing of the feast day, rather than anything Valentine actually did. The 14th of February is a time of year when the natural world is waking up, the first green shoots of spring are seen – and in medieval times it was believed to be the day when the birds mated. A good bit of material there then for a love feast. Thus, it seems from fragmented stories of a not well remembered, not particularly important Christian saint and the things that were observed to be happening on his feast day, we end up with the origins of Valentine’s Day as we now know it.

As the incarnational, church in the world though what might we say about all of that. How does it chime in with other views about human relationships?

Of the Greek words that can be used for our English word ‘love’ we are probably here in the realms of *eros* and in our closest relationships we should not simply play down that which attracts us to another. At the same time in a world that can often present unhelpful images of perfection when it comes to physical good looks and can leave people feeling inadequate on all sorts of levels, it might be important for us to emphasise that *eros* does work beyond the realm of mere physicality. Thus, we can love people for their intelligence or their humour and even for their eccentricity and quirkiness, as well as for their impressively narrow waistline.

But we might also want to say that it is not only in the realm of *eros* that relationships work and that other expressions of love might be vital in sustaining the relationships we have – and we might even know some of this from our faith.

Today, our Gospel reading gives us the story of the transfiguration. It is not the easiest of stories to say something coherent about, but I will have a go. I would offer you the view that Moses and Elijah in this story could be carrying placards declaring ‘spoiler alert’. I say that because we get a little

insight in some way, in this story, into Jesus' ascension and glorification – and the spoiler – if you like – is that before the dreadful events of the crucifixion – don't worry because it will be alright in the end. It is then glorification without sacrifice – and thus the story just seems a little out of place - and I would not be the first to suggest that it might have begun its life as a resurrection story of Jesus - before it migrated to a place at the centre of his ministry.

Similarly, in our relationships with others, we might be mistaken if we think it can be all glory without sacrifice. I am thrown back then to my much-used wedding sermon, trotted out on many occasions in the last quarter of a century or so. Often with 1 Corinthians 13 as its prelude, it would talk of the importance of *eros* in bringing the couple together who were standing before me, while reminding them that the 'love' spoken of in this great hymn is *agape*, the love shown by God to humanity in being prepared to die for us – the love that is about sacrifice and self-offering. If *eros* brought them together then, it is most likely *agape* that would keep them together – the art of dying a death to self each day, for those we live alongside.

As the Church in the world today we offer our blessing to all those who through one form of *eros* or another will use Valentines name today - and we will hope that they may come to know more still of the way of *agape*, which is pretty much, in many ways, the way of Christ.

In the crisis our world currently faces we pray that we too may come to know the wisdom of that way – as we seek not just to save and satisfy ourselves, but those we live alongside and share our lives with. Amen