

Sunday 14 February: Sunday next before Lent

St Valentine's Day

Readings: 2 Corinthians 3.12 – 4.2; Luke 9.28b-36

For Clinton Cards the last week's business is second only to Christmas. Yesterday and today the West End flower stalls have their busiest days of the year: 'Happy St Valentine's Day'. It's hard to escape, except in church where we don't do St Valentine anymore. The tradition of celebrating romantic love on 14th February probably has more to do with the coming of Spring and the pairing of birds in second century Rome than with the virtues of a saint we're not sure ever existed; or there might have been three and we don't know much about any of them. So today in church is the 'Sunday next before Lent'. It's not very romantic.

This week members of the Church of England's General Synod lamented that the Church is increasingly treated as marginal by the Government, the BBC and society at large. This is the Church that no longer celebrates St Valentine and which does not know how to introduce women bishops and seeks exemption from secular employment law. We don't need others to marginalise us; we're doing a pretty good job for ourselves.

Undoubtedly there is something going on between Church and society, described variously as secularisation or pluralism, and a fashionable atheist minority is hostile to religion. But the vast majority of people still think that to be human is to be religious and at the last census 42 million people in the United Kingdom identified themselves as Christian. The Church dismissed most of them as 'cultural Christians' and complained they don't come to church whereas we could have celebrated and sought to include them but we're feeling anxious about how Church and society fit together and how the gospel of Jesus Christ is lived in the present.

It's probably an urban myth that Eskimos are said to have many different words for 'snow'. It makes sense in a cold climate. In Christian theology, in which love is the principle way of speaking about God and the activity of God, it helps to distinguish between different sorts of what in English is called by the one word 'love'. Greek, the language of the New Testament, uses *eros* for passionate desire and *philia* for dutiful or familial affection, as in Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, but neither *eros* nor *philia* is adequate to the Christian conception of love which in the New Testament is expressed as agape, a word hardly used before except in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures.

“Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God, and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.

1 John 4.8

A form of the word agape is used each time – Beloved, love one another, love God. 'Agape' was translated into Latin as 'caritas', and hence (especially through the Authorised Version) passed into English as 'charity'. Hebrew is even more variegated.

According to F L Cross's Dictionary of the Christian Church:

Love, as the bond between the Father and the Son, is particularly associated with the Holy Spirit by St Augustine and other writers. The Old Testament command that man should love God (eg Deut. 6.5) and his neighbour (Lev. 19.18) are joined together by Christ (Mark.12.29-31), but the peculiarly Christian character of the love required is emphasised

by the Lord's description of the demand for love as the 'new commandment' (John 13.34). This Christian love is the greatest of the theological virtues... a matter of the will rather than the emotions... [which consists] of keeping God's commandments. This supernatural love, however, is, according to St Augustine, a gift of God and can only be accepted by accepting His grace.

F L Cross, Dictionary of the Christian Church, Oxford University Press

C S Lewis's short classic on The Four Loves speaks about love as affection, friendship, eros and charity. It is helpful to have these different English words to express such different aspects of love, but it's the introduction to the book I find so compelling in which Lewis distinguishes between what he calls *Gift-love* and *Need-love*. Lewis began by thinking that only *Gift-love* is Divine.

"The Father gives all he is and has to the Son. The Son gives himself back to the Father and gives Himself to the world and for the world to the Father, and thus gives the world (in Himself) back to the Father, too."

"Our Need-love, as Plato saw, is 'the son of Poverty'... We are born helpless. As soon as we are fully conscious we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves..."

Lewis has become so well known a character in our day that it's easy to imagine him thinking that need is a human weakness, whereas we in our day are much more aware of our needs being what bring us together, that we are incomplete without one another. Fortunately Lewis's intellect got him quickly to the same conclusion. (Excuse the sexist language but he was a man of his time.)

"No-one calls a child selfish because it turns for comfort to its mother; nor an adult who turns to his fellow "for company". Those, whether children or adults, who do so least, are not usually the most selfless. Where Need-love is felt there may be reasons for denying or totally mortifying it; but not to feel it is in general the mark of a cold egoist. Since we do in reality need one another ("it is not good for man to be alone")... the failure of this Need-love in consciousness is a bad spiritual symptom; just as lack of appetite is a bad medical symptom because [people] really do need food..."

Every Christian would agree that a man's spiritual health is exactly proportional to his love for God. But man's love for God, from the very nature of the case, must always be very largely, and must often be entirely, a Need-love. This is obvious when we implore forgiveness for our sins or support in our tribulations."

C S Lewis, The Four Loves, Fontana Books, 1963

Love is a rich, diverse word.

Most of us build our lives on romantic love, and make promises to our significant other which become the basis for our self and society, and the bringing up of a family.

Church struggles with erotic love but we also struggle with love as friendship, which finds unity with each other in deep communion between people who know their difference and our need of each other, and which deepens and matures through life.

Love is the way of life into which we are born and are baptised. It is not just an emotional feeling, love is our Lord's command, God's will. It is instinctive *and* demanding. Love requires discipline.

Church has given up on Valentine at the very time in history when we most need Church to be confident about what it is to love. All brides are beautiful because love transfigures them, and us. This is the connection with today's Gospel of the transfiguration of Christ, to our union with God and one another. It is what the Law and the Prophets point us to. Love finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. The disciples at the transfiguration bear witness.

This is the way into which Nicola is to be baptised this morning. It is a reminder that through Lent to Holy Week and the glory of Easter, it is love that is to be renewed in us and through which we come to share God's glory.