

**Sunday 6th February 2022**  
**Evening Service: 'An Early Valentine'**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Song of Solomon 8;1-7**

*"Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame".*

I am an incurable romantic, I always have been, for me St Valentine's Day gives an excuse if one was ever needed to celebrate romance and love, and although Valentine's day has perhaps been overly commercialised. It is an opportunity to let the person that you love know what they mean to you, a time to show love and to celebrate it and be unapologetic in acknowledging that love.

This evening we make no apologies that we take the opportunity to celebrate an early Valentine here at St Nick's to celebrate love and in so doing recognise that as a church we appear to have perhaps been too focussed on a narrow interpretation of God's loving intention's for all humanity rather than recognising that in love in however it is manifest, we can see the true nature of the creator.

Valentines Day gives us that opportunity to reflect on the nature of love and whether you are single, married, gay, straight, civil partnered, questioning or whatever, love as God created can be your experience.

Though no one has pinpointed the exact origin of the celebration of St Valentine, one good place to start is ancient Rome. From Feb. 13 to 15, the Romans celebrated the feast of Lupercalia. The men sacrificed a goat and a dog, then whipped women with the hides of the animals they had just slain. The Roman romantics we understand were drunk and they were naked, young women would actually line up for the men to hit them, as they believed this would make them fertile.

The brutal fete included a matchmaking lottery, in which young men drew the names of women from a jar. An early version of swiping right, the couple would then be coupled up for the duration of the festival — or longer, if the match was right.

The ancient Romans may also be responsible for the name of our modern day of love. Emperor Claudius II executed two men — both named Valentine — on Feb. 14 of different years in the 3rd century A.D. Their martyrdom was honoured by the Catholic Church with the celebration of St. Valentine's Day.

The first real association of St. Valentine's Day with romantic love, or 'love birds', derives from Geoffrey Chaucer's "Parlement of Foules" (or, 'Parliament of Fowls'). Dating from 1382, Chaucer celebrated the engagement of the 15-year-old King Richard II to Anne of Bohemia via a poem, in which he wrote: "For this was on St. Valentine's Day, when every bird (fowl) cometh to choose his mate".

True to form though, it was a Frenchman who is recorded as sending the earliest surviving Valentine's note to his sweetheart. Charles, the Duke of Orléans, was writing to her from his prison cell in the Tower of London following his capture at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. In the poem the duke talks of his love for his wife and refers to her as "my very sweet Valentine".

Of the 154 sonnets that Shakespeare's wrote sonnet 116 can be seen as the definitive response to the 'what is love' question. The language of the sonnet is as deep and profound as any philosopher's could be, expressed in the most beautiful language. Love is given an identity as an immortal force, which overcomes age, death, and time itself. Love "the marriage of true minds"—is perfect and unchanging; it does not "admit impediments," and it does not change when it find changes in the loved one.

Love, unlike the physical being, is not subject to decay. love is through a metaphor: a guiding star to lost ships ("wand'ring barks") that is not susceptible to storms (it "looks on tempests

and is never shaken”). it is not susceptible to time. Though beauty fades in time as rosy lips and cheeks come within “his bending sickle’s compass,” love does not change with hours and weeks: instead, it “bears it out ev’n to the edge of doom.”

Shakespeare employs an amazing array of poetic devices throughout the sonnet to convey the eternal nature of love, and ends by staking everything on his observations if his statements can be proved to be error, he declares, he must never have written a word, and no man can ever have been in love.

Love has since creation caused the soul to soar and to express its feelings in music, art and written and spoken word one of the earliest examples of romantic poetry is The Song of Solomon from which our first reading this evening came. The Song of Solomon, a collection of love poetry that contains not a single mention of God. Its inclusion in the Bible has puzzled Jews and Christians for millennia. For most of history the idea that the Bible contained erotic verse was so shocking that people explained the poems as really being about the love between God and human souls, or between Jesus and the Church. Admittedly, this took a lot of doing. The second-century theologian Origen wrote ten volumes on the Song of Solomon in order to explain that it had absolutely nothing to do with human sexuality.

Even Protestants, who usually insisted on the plain meaning of Scripture, ignored the plain meaning of this book and happily read other meanings into it. In the eighteenth-century commentators finally started to agree that it might actually be a book of love poetry, but they weren’t impressed by it. One wrote that “it was written by Solomon when He was become Wicked and Foolish, and Lascivious, and Idolatrous”.

The Song of Solomon is a collection of passionate poetry that describes both the joy and the pain of romantic love.

It contains passages of great physicality; The Song of Solomon celebrates that physical love. Contrary to centuries of interpretation I think that the reason the Bible contains this book

is because such passionate love between people is encouraged and blessed by God. We can rejoice in love that is as strong as death and worth more than any amount of wealth.

Of course, love is not just about passion, and we are reminded constantly in scripture that all love, is first and foremost a reflection of the love God has for us. The readings from the opening sentences of the C of E marriage service “God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.” Words from the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the first letter of the Apostle John speak to us of the relationship between love and God. The church believes that we can love each other because God first loves us. Love, Jesus told his disciples, was the great commandment. This love includes the romantic love between a couple, but it also includes friendship and charity and the sort of self-sacrificing love that saw Jesus willing to die: “No one has greater love than this,” Jesus said, “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13)

We are invited to love each other with a love that includes all these elements: passion and romance and friendship and charity and sacrifice. That’s a huge expectation to place on them, but it’s one we believe that they will be able to fulfill because “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God”. Whenever people love each other, God is in that love.

I John talks about love as the fundamental nature and sign of God.

Where you see love, you know the presence of God. Out of love, God the Son comes to die, so that we can be drawn back into the love of the Father Son and Holy Spirit.

In God then, love is not an abstract quality, but one that we experience very directly as activity. God acts lovingly towards us and that is how we know that he is indeed love.

In God, being and doing are not separate, he is love and acts lovingly. For us, that is not always the case because unlike God we are not yet complete.

The people to whom I John is addressed are people who have accepted the saving love of God with gratitude, but who are still able to act, like us, without love to one another because in them, as in us, life has a beginning and a finite end.

The great aim of our life is to make the beginning and the end of love get further and further apart in us, so that there is more and more room, more and more love we can share. In God love has no beginning and no end as the great 17<sup>th</sup> century poet John Donne said in one of his Christmas sermons “God’s love is like a circle endless”.

When we try to limit God through our human interpretation of his love, we try and limit the limitless, we try to measure the immeasurable

Love as intended by God cannot be measured in human terms and our response should be to allow Love to be freed and expressed how God intended without limits.

And that’s what God’s love for us is like. God’s love is far beyond price- it is more precious than the whole universe. His love cannot be bought- nothing that we do can make God love us more or more amazing less And so God gives his love away, as a free gift to anyone who will take it, a gift given in and through his Son Jesus Christ.

Fr Bill Addy