

Sunday 1 March 2026
A Celebration of Love - Marriage Preparation

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Song of Solomon 8;1-7

Poem: Sonnet 116

I am an incurable romantic, I always have been, for me St Valentine's Day which we have recently celebrated gives an excuse if one was ever needed to celebrate romance and love, and although it has perhaps been overly commercialised, it is still 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.

Valentine's Day is a time to celebrate love but I believe that celebration of love should not be restricted to just one day but should be a constant. This evening we make no apologies that we take the opportunity to celebrate a belated 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 intentions for all humanity rather than recognising that in love in however it is manifest, we can see the true nature of the creator.

This evening, we join together to celebrate love, and it gives an opportunity to reflect on the nature of love and whether you are single, married, gay, straight, civil partnered, or questioning, love as God created and has always intended can be your experience.

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 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.

The great English writer and playwright William Shakespeare, published in 1609 his *Quatro* containing 154 sonnets. Throughout his sonnets, Shakespeare implies that love can hurt. Yet despite the emotional and physical pain, like the speaker, we continue falling in love. Shakespeare shows that falling in love is an inescapable aspect of the human condition indeed, expressing love is part of what makes us human.

True Love In Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 means loving a partner for their inner self and all the changes and flaws that come with that person. Shakespeare believes that love "is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken". Shakespeare attempts to define love, by telling both what it is and is not. In the first quatrain, the speaker says that love" the marriage of true minds "is perfect and unchanging; it does not "admit impediments," and it does not change when it finds changes in the loved one. In the second quatrain, the speaker tells what 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"). In the third quatrain, the speaker again describes what love is not: 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." In the couplet, the speaker attests to his certainty that love is as he says: "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".

Of course, love is not just about passion, and throughout the New Testament Gospels and Letters we are constantly brought back to the position that all love is first and foremost a reflection of the love God has for us. The first letter of the Apostle John speaks to us of the relationship between love and God, in the opening sentences of the Marriage service quote from 1 John 4:16 "God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them." 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)

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.

In God love has no beginning and no end. 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 love us less. And so, God gives his love away through Grace as a free gift to anyone who will take it, a gift given in and through his Son Jesus Christ and that is something we should celebrate every day.

Fr Bill Addy