

Ipswich Unitarians

SAINT VALENTINES DAY: THE GROWTH OF LOVE

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Saint Valentine's Day doesn't really have much to do with Saint Valentine – about whom little is known and none of that is about romantic love!

Traditionally, the 14th February was the day when birds paired off in preparation for nesting, mating, egg-laying, and the bringing of a new generation into the world. It was a time to celebrate the first signs of spring and the fertility that goes with it. And if we go back to the days of the Romans, this was the time for wild fertility rites at the festival of Lupercalia. One of the customs then involved the young men choosing partners for the festivities by drawing little notes on which the names of the young women were written. This is the origin of the Valentine's cards that we exchange today.

So, although nominally the Christian saint's day of Saint Valentine, what we really have is a pagan survival. The name 'February' derives from the Latin 'febris', meaning 'fever'. In ancient times it was the month sacred to Juno Februata, goddess of the fever of love. And this why the Church didn't really approve of what is now Saint Valentine's day and did its best either to suppress it altogether or, when this didn't work, to take it over by dedicating it to the saint – to whom a church was also dedicated in Rome in the 4th century.

In the 19th century, another attempt to make Saint Valentine's Day respectable involved the making and sending of 'Valentines' to family and friends - rather than to lovers, actual or potential – much as we send Christmas cards today. They were expressions of love, but not of romantic, still less of sexual love. Today, though, Saint Valentine's Day – apart from bring a business opportunity – is a day for professions of romantic love. And whereas once these were secret and unsigned, this air of mystery has largely been dispelled today. Indeed, if send anonymous love notes to people nowadays you could end up being prosecuted for 'stalking'!

Well, so much for Saint Valentine's Day! A bit of harmless fun, for the most part, but surely nothing to do with Christianity or the Bible! Well, maybe not! It would be a poor religion that didn't recognise an aspect of love that touches most of us at some point in our lives and, if we are fortunate, never altogether departs from it. True, the first youthful flush of romance may not last, but if it really is love then it will mature into something altogether deeper, more long-lasting, and more committed. And the Romans were right about fertility too!

Out of love's first febrile encounters come children – children such as little Leon who we have Christened and welcomed here today, just as his father and uncle were Christened here by my late father, as some here may remember.

In the Bible we have one of the most passionate, erotic and glorious love poems ever written. Indeed, so passionate and erotic is it that embarrassed churchmen have always pretended that is all allegorical and has nothing to do with romance and sex at all. But it is! No one can read the Song of Songs with an open mind and not know that it is about that intense and exclusive physical love that can grip two lovers in its fevered embrace:

*Wear me as a seal over your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion cruel as the grave;*

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*it blazes up like a blazing fire,
fiercer than any flame.
Many waters cannot quench love...'*

(Song of Songs 7: 6-7)

Most modern scholars see this remarkable poem as a dialogue between real human lovers – a real human bride and bridegroom – in the full fever of their love. The Song of Songs is one of the most remarkable books in the Bible and it shows that love such as this, love such as most lovers will recognise, is as much a part of the life of faith and of God's will for human beings as every other wholesome aspect of our existence. But it also carries an implicit warning: that the burning power of desire can, if we are not careful, overmaster the restraints that true love imposes on it. As Saint Paul wrote – admittedly, in a rather different context: 'love is never selfish' (I Corinthians 13: 4).

The desire that takes no real account of the one desired – or of anyone else who may be affected – is *not* love, it is selfishness. And it will be a breeding ground for the evil that poisons human relationships.

The love that the Song of Songs is about is mutual love. It is the love that exists between equals who 'truly, madly, deeply' (if I may borrow that phrase!) *care* for each other as well as desire each other. But, of necessity, it is also exclusive love. It is about the two of them and no one else can be a part of it. There are other voices in the Song of Songs – provided by a chorus of friends or 'companions' – but their role is simply to be cheerleaders, as we might be when at a wedding ourselves:

*Let us rejoice and be glad for you;
let us praise your love more than wine,
your caresses more than rare wine.'*

(Song of Songs 1: 4)

Those are words I often like to use at the beginning of a wedding service here. But the understandably exclusive love of lovers must be transformed once they are truly committed to each other - like the bride and bridegroom in the Song of Songs – and once their love finds physical fruition in the birth of a child. It's not just about the two of them anymore. Exclusive love must grow into the inclusive love of parents and of family. It must now become the 'grown-up' love of adults. And although this may still retain something of that febrile 'young love', it must recognise that things have –irrevocably – moved on.

This will be no hardship because new dimensions of love are opened up when a child is born. Those who love their child for his or her own sake will find in that love the fulfilment of something essential in themselves. We are not isolated atoms, we are part of an eternal, divine continuum of life, and the more we can accept that simple truth the happier we will all be on this troubled earth. A child must be *included* in the love of his or her parents and become part of the organic whole that is true family. As Olaf Stapledon wrote, of children:

'They ought to grow up in the community of their parents.'
(‘Sirius’)

But they should also grow up in another kind of community: the community of the wider family; the community of friends, of the church, the street, the village – the community of a wider

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society that cares for them, protects them, respects them, and helps them to grow and mature into kind, loving, and responsible adults.

Jesus spoke of the need to recognise and respect in children something divine. When his over-protective disciples tried to shoo away the children brought to him for a blessing, Jesus said,

‘Let the children come to me; don’t try to stop them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’

(Matthew 19: 14)

And for any who might abuse a child’s innocence and fail to respect the divine within them, Jesus had harsh words:

‘...if anyone causes the downfall of one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for him to have a millstone hung round his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.’

(Matthew 18: 6)

While the prime responsibility for raising a child – both physically and spiritually – lies with his or her parents, *all* of us – the whole ‘village’, as it were – have our part to play too. Let us not fail to fulfil it.
