

Ash Wednesday – 14 February 2018

While it may seem incongruous that we are gathering to celebrate Ash Wednesday on Valentine's Day, I think that there is actually something quite beautiful about this. This day is a day of great love and devotion both in the secular world as we honour, and are honoured by, those we love. However, Ash Wednesday is a day of great love and devotion in the Church, second only to Good Friday. It is right that we would gather on a day dedicated to recognizing and uplifting love when we are also gathering to re-commit ourselves to the great love God shares with us through his Son, Jesus Christ.

While it may not seem like it, Good Friday is truly the day upon which we celebrate and commemorate the greatest gift of love known in all of history. Good Friday is that day upon which we slow down to remember and immerse ourselves in the true love that was given to us in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as the one who gave himself out of pure love for those who seldom deserve it and who all struggle to receive it. Good Friday is that reminder to those who prefer the image of love as portrayed on Valentine's Day – an image of hearts and roses and perfect, easy relationships – that true love is that gift of self-sacrifice that is willing to drop down into the depths of despair to walk with the one we love, or who we are loved by, to lead us back into the glory of life lived in peace and harmony and wholeness.

True love may indeed have those "life is perfect, beautiful and kind" seasons, but true love is more known for its practice of coming alongside the one loved in an act of selflessness and a desire to walk the path back to wholeness, even when wholeness seems an impossible dream.

It would be easier to think about such days as Easter as the truly important festivals of love in the Church, but that would be to look, as we do on Valentine's Day, at only the upside of love. God loved us so much that he raised his Son from the dead that we might all share in eternal life. If that is not love, then I don't know what love might be. However, Easter is not the wholeness of love, just the completion of it.

Good Friday is the day upon which we recognize, because of the great discomfort that we feel, that God's love for us is so profoundly deep and everlasting. Because God would give us his most beloved, we are better able to understand how truly beloved we are. It was in the sacrifice and the pain that the depth of God's love was shared *with* us, and comprehended *by* us.

I know that I am loved deeply by my mother. Over the years she has been there for me, supporting me, challenging me, celebrating victories with me. I have never doubted her love. However, it was not in the moments of greatest joy that I truly came to understand and trust in her love. It was in moments of greatest fear and despair that I was able to recognize that love.

When I was 4 years old I had to have extensive surgery and I was very scared. When I went into the pre-op ward, my mom tied her scarf around my bed so that I would know that she loved me. That symbol meant the world to me. However, the depth of her love came home to me when I was coming out of the anesthetic and I opened my eyes to see the worry on her face. I know now that she was not always with me physically but I also know that while I was having that surgery, she was with me for every second: praying, worrying, hoping that I would be fine. I learned early on that true love is not like Valentine's Day commercials but rather like those relationships that spend time in the darkness with us as we journey toward the light.

The love that we have been given through Jesus Christ on that Good Friday so many years ago is a love that we get glimpses of and share with those we love in small ways every day of our life. No matter who we are – spouses, children, friends, parents – or how deep our love may be, we will never be able to match that deep and eternal love God shared, and shares, with us each and every day into eternity. At this time, ours is only to love with all we have and anticipate that time when we truly come to understand the profundity and impact that love from God through Christ has had upon us.

Ours, however, is not just to receive that love. Ours is to respond, the best we can, to the One who has loved us so much and in that sacrificial and powerful way. Our response is our opportunity to share the Church's human version of Valentine's Day back with God. And we do so through this day of preparation, sacrifice and love – Ash Wednesday.

If Good Friday is Jesus' declaration of love for all of us, then Ash Wednesday is the Christian response to that gift of love. On this day we gather to acknowledge that Good Friday was necessary, not for God's sake but for ours. Ash Wednesday is an opportunity intentionally set aside for each of us to declare our love and devotion to God through Christ in response to that love God has shared so freely with us.

This day, this celebration and beginning of a season of remembering, repenting, trying to turn back toward God, provides us with that opportunity to love God back. To sit in the difficult parts of loving and trust that God understands that our love is more profound than even we can recognize ourselves.

When we gather here and receive the sign of the cross in ashes on our foreheads, we are not doing so as an outward sign to the world, but rather as a sign to ourselves that we both accept God's deep love and we commit ourselves again to loving God in return. We are invited to do things intentionally that draw us back into a deep-love relationship with God and which remind us daily that true love is not all hearts and roses and good times but rather true love is that which lifts us up and carries us through the bad and difficult times so that we can better appreciate the good when it comes as well.

We are invited, and expected, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting and almsgiving and reading and meditating on the word of God. None of these expectations are punishments or Lenten denials. Quite to the contrary, each and every one of these expectations are exercises that bring us back to focusing on the one who loves us more than we could ever love another. Each of these things is an action that, like my mother giving me her scarf and then being right there beside me when I came out of surgery, remind us that God is the one, true love for which we would do anything, just as we are God's one true love for which he did *everything*.

On this Valentine's Day, let's all take a close look at what love truly is in our lives. And on this Ash Wednesday, let's all take an even closer look at how we will respond to that incredible and profound love that God has shared freely with us in his Son Jesus Christ.

Ash Wednesday, like Good Friday, is a really tough day to face head on, but then love is not always easy to give or receive, but it is always worth the effort.