

St Nicholas Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 14th February 2021

As well having been the City of Culture away back in the early 1990's, did you know that Glasgow also labels itself the City of Love?

When you think of the language of love, Glasgow might not be the first place that springs to mind. A "Glesca kiss" could certainly not be misconstrued as a romantic gesture!

And it is all to do with St Valentine!

Away back in the late nineteenth century, a wealthy French family, impressed by the devotion of many of the Glaswegians, made a donation of a box containing some bones of St Valentine to St Francis Church in the Gorbals area – his right forearm to be precise! The relics sat there for almost a century in complete anonymity. Then in 1993, the casket was moved to the Blessed St John Duns Scotus Church where it has been given a place of honour at the entrance to the Church.

Each year on St Valentine's Day, a statue of the Saint is placed next to it and it is decorated with flowers. This has become a popular place for proposals of marriage on 14th February!

Glasgow is not the only place in the world which claims to have some of the bones of St Valentine – there are at least ten other places claiming to have some of the relics of the Saint, including Dublin, Rome, Vienna, Prague, Poland, Malta and Birmingham! He certainly spread himself around!

Very little is known about St Valentine and much of his story revolved around legend.

He is thought to have died during the 3rd century, and is recognised as by the Roman Catholic Church as the patron saints of lovers, beekeepers and epileptics.

One tradition has it that Valentine was a Roman priest and physician, who suffered a martyr's death at the command of the Emperor Claudius II in 270 AD.

Claudius had decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, and so he issued a decree that young men were not allowed to get married. Valentine, realising the injustice of this, defied the Emperor and continued to perform marriages for young lovers in secret. When his actions were discovered, Claudius ordered that he be put to death.

According to the legend, the Saint had signed a letter "From your Valentine" to his jailer's daughter, whom it is said he befriended and healed from blindness. He had been also accused of helping persecuted Christians and was executed on the 14th February.

The first Valentine was from a man who died for his love. But not for his love of his fiancée or his wife, but rather for his love of his Lord Jesus Christ.

Today, St Valentine's Day is a day to remember not just our spouses or boyfriends or girlfriends, but all the people we cherish in our lives. A friend of mine made the point that true love can be between friends, brothers and sisters, parents and children.

And of course, love is more than Hallmark cards, bouquets of red roses, and boxes of Thornton's chocolates.

I still have a card that some anonymous person in my previous congregation sent to me on St Valentine's Day, and it still makes me laugh. In it, and I haven't the foggiest notion yet who was responsible, the sender had written,

“Walnuts grow in Africa,
Peanuts grow there too,
But it takes a place like Johnstone,
To grow a nut like you!”

They knew me so well, obviously!

Let's face it – love is probably the best thing that you and I have to celebrate.

“Love” as the 50s film and song put it, “is a many-splendored thing”.

But the simplest way, it seems to me, to get a handle of what we mean by love in a Christian context, is to say that in the Scriptures, we learn that God is love, and that, as Christians, we try to live and share His sort of love with others.

And for me, Heaven's Valentine to us, is contained in a love note with only one sentence – some twenty-four words that speak more than a library full of books.

It is a verse that is familiar, and yet its subject is always fresh.

“For God so love the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Love is sadly a word that has been greatly devalued in Western culture. We are apt to use it to ascribe our love to anything from Ayr United or Glasgow Rangers, to Turkish Delight or Mancini's ice cream!

When St John wrote that verse in his Gospel, He was talking about divine love. Love of a supernatural kind.

It has been said that if all the Gospels had been lost early on, except that one verse, that would be enough for us.

Once we know that God loves us to bits, then we have hope – the hope that nothing can separate us from Him, and Jesus came to show that divine love – as the hymn says, “Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.”

During this Lockdown, I have been binge watching that wonderful series, with great actors, “The Crown.” I recommend it to you.

Of course, our wonderful Queen would never have had to take on the burden of Monarchy, had it not been brought about by the affair of her uncle, David, King Edward VIII, and Mrs Wallis Simpson, a relationship that has been called an example of selfless love.

What could be more selfless than a king who gives up his throne for the woman he loves?

King Edward was a womaniser, with a fondness for married women.

Wallis Simpson's first marriage had ended in divorce, and in 1931, during her second marriage to Ernest Simpson, she met Edward, then Prince of Wales.

Five years later, after the death of King George V, when Edward became King, Wallis divorced her second husband so that she could marry Edward.

The King's desire to marry a woman with two living ex-husbands threatened to cause a constitutional crisis in our country.

Faced with the prospect of his entire government resigning over his scandalous affair, King Edward decided he would rather retain his relationship with his mistress than with his government, and on December 10th 1936, he abdicated in favour of love.

Wallis and Edward, exiled to France, married on June 3 1937.

Romantics still cling to that as an image of selfless sacrifice – a king willing to give up all for the woman he loved.

If a royal love story of selfless sacrifice is what touches your heart, then you need look no further than the life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here we see the King of the Universe, who likewise relinquished His Throne for love.

We find the One who loved so purely, so deeply, that He was willing to give up all to gain an eternal relationship with those He loved.

That is the Gospel of Love.

Have you ever felt unloved, uncared for, unappreciated, unnoticed, unworthy? I am sure many have had these feelings at one time or another.

Then remember that God loves us as if there was only one of us to love!

That is something worth celebrating – and not just on one day in the calendar!

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