

## February 2024 – This Year’s Great Overlap Ash Wednesday and the Day of Love



Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent – and this year it lands on Valentine’s Day!

Lent is a beautiful, holy time where we fast, pray and prepare to imagine again the reality of our Lord’s sacrifice and love for us on the Cross. To immerse ourselves in the gospel journey through the last weeks of the life of Jesus – towards the mystery and majesty of the Resurrection.

Christians often ‘give something up’, or, has become more popular over recent years, ‘take something on’ – perhaps work towards fundraising or some other charitable purpose. Perhaps ‘doing something’ more healthy or wholesome.

However, have you ever been in a position where the ‘giving up’ of something, became a means to itself? It became more about ‘not eating cake’, than it did engaging with the Lenten journey? It was more about declining the sweet than delving deeper into the scripture?

Would God prefer us to give up Dairy Milk – or read and wrestle with Romans or Revelation?

It is easier ... always, to go for the easier option...

What is the easier option for you? Is it easier to give something up that is lovely and chocolatey, than to take something on with sincerity that means a time commitment that will ultimately feed our souls. We might not have the ‘time’ we can give perhaps – which would make the sacrifice much more sacrificial!

So, for those who have given up chocolate for Lent – what will you do if you are given some posh chocolates (perhaps from Lindt, Thorntons or even Hotel Chocolate) for Valentine’s

Day? Will Lent just start when all the yummy chocolate has been eaten – or have you the power to save it until Easter?

Is giving up chocolate a first world luxury ... and does this really have any significance when it comes to the pursuit of holiness and our pilgrimage through Lent in the footsteps of our Lord?

This year I have decided to look more closely at the overlap between St Valentine and Ash Wednesday to try and understand more of the significance of what a transformative journey through Lent might look like.

St. Valentine was known for his generosity and kindness. He was a priest in the Catholic tradition and followed Jesus. He was martyred by the Roman Empire in Rome in AD 269 – martyred for his faith. He had his head chopped off. On Valentine's Day! You don't get any cards that have a verse about that inside!

We live in the secularisation and commercialisation of 'Valentine's Day'. However, St Valentine is honoured by both Catholic and Protestant Christians (Orthodox Christians mark his day on the 6<sup>th</sup> February).

There are many stories and legends about Valentine – his Roman name being 'Valentinus'. One account suggests he was an Italian priest, and while under house arrest, he healed the adopted daughter of a Judge. The Judge had been testing Valentine and conversing with him about the validity of Jesus. Valentine was an evangelist, and as a result of the miraculous healing many came to faith and were baptized. The Judge then released the Christian prisoners in his care.

Later Valentine was arrested again for telling people about Jesus and was told to renounce his faith or be killed. Before his execution he wrote a note to the girl he had healed from her blindness – it was signed: 'from your Valentine'.

Before he died, knowing he was about to die, he restored the sight and hearing of his gaoler's daughter. Another miracle.

During his ministry Valentine was also involved in performing Christian marriages and helping Christian men escape from joining the army which was Pagan. It is said he reminded the men of God's love – of their vows and gave them cut out hearts from pieces of parchment.

So, Valentine – An evangelist, a believer in love, a healer, full of the power of Jesus – a brave man, who died on the day we celebrate love.

He sacrificed his life, for his love. The love of Jesus. And while he knew he was facing death – he wrote a letter to a girl he had helped – perhaps even saved. I wonder what else was in that letter? Perhaps a word of encouragement to keep on going? Regardless of the cost? That cost is indeed worth it?

And even though everyone talks about 'Valentine's Day' and knows his name – hardly anyone know who he was or what he did.

On Ash Wednesday – the same might be true. How many know it is the start of Lent, why we do what we do, or even why Jesus did what he did?

This Ash Wednesday may we remember our Lord's love for us – His sacrifice, and His courage – and perhaps as Valentine's Day falls on Ash Wednesday we could make a commitment to sending letters of love and encouragement to those we feel need it. And maybe we could send them chocolate too.

Bless you all this Lent

Jo

(Hampden View - Sheffield)