



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

10th February 2023

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."

1 John 4:7-8

The desire and the propensity to love are written into us as part of God's image in which he made us; and the urge to express -and the need to receive- love are parts of that divine image which survive in us, even though we *"all...fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23)

Next Tuesday is St. Valentine's Day, which can bring mixed feelings. Since Christmas the shops have been offering Happy Valentine's Day 'kitsch', red-hearted and romantic! But it's not happy for some, it may rub salt into the wounds of loss, of broken relationships or unfulfilled longings.

The romance bit is quite a recent product of the card companies; we actually don't know much about St. Valentine; or rather, we don't know which of the several Valentines around the 3rd Century AD is the saint; it may even be a mixture of them! In the Roman Empire at that time married men were not reckoned to make good soldiers, and were not conscripted into the army. So Emperor Claudius II ruled that young men who were able to fight could not marry. One of those possible Valentines was a priest who secretly married young couples so that the man would not be called up. He was caught and condemned, and while awaiting death he healed the judge's daughter of blindness. It didn't stop him being executed, so legend has it that he wrote a last letter to the girl, signing it 'from your Valentine'. There's a mixture of legends, but 14th February has grown into a festival of romance.

Well, as the song says, 'nice work if you can get it', but the red and romantic version is not the only kind of love, nor the most deep and lasting. The Greek language has several words for love, and the one most used in the New Testament is the word 'agape', meaning selfless, costly love, that reaches out with kindness and compassion. It's the equivalent of the Hebrew 'hesed', mentioned in the 20th January 'Thought'. Agape includes other dimensions, but goes far beyond the sentimental and superficial; its character is self-giving rather than self-centred.

This is the kind of love with which God loves us, and it is there for everyone! He provides, he sustains, he encourages and - perhaps especially in hard times - he gives a sense that there is more. And that 'more' is offered to us in Jesus, who, in the ultimate act of self-giving love, died that we might be forgiven and have new life. The offer is still there.

It is the highest of human experience to enjoy all aspects of the divine love which God shares with us as part of his image. *"We (can) love because he first loved us"* (1 John 4:19). Sadly, as the advertisers, the media and human experience show, the image of 'love' is often distorted. John writes, *"God is love"*... perhaps we should add, *but 'love' is not God*.

Happy Valentine's Day!