

“VaLENTine’s Day”

Introduction

It is a quirky calendar coincidence this year that Ash Wednesday is on Valentine's Day, and Easter is on April Fools' Day. The last time that happened was in 1945. Later that year, the Detroit Tigers won the World Series. No joke.

So here we are in 2018 celebrating VaLENTine’s Day. There is certainly a contrast between these two, Valentine’s Day and Ash Wednesday. Valentine’s Day is about expressions of love and romance, sweet sentimental love songs, and special, often extravagant, gifts. On the other hand, Ash Wednesday is about expressions of mortality and sinfulness, sad sorrowful songs, and no giving of things, rather giving up things, practicing discipline and restraint.

Love might mean never having to say you are sorry, but on this Valentine’s we are doing just that. We are kicking off the penitential season of Lent with ashes on our foreheads and acknowledging our sorrowful sinfulness.

But Ash Wednesday is not just about ashes on our foreheads; it is about the love in our hearts. The marking with ashes and giving up of something we cherish has value only if it draws our hearts closer to the heart of God.

That is what the Lenten journey is about, our hearts drawing closer to the heart of God and experiencing God’s great love for us. We take ashes to remember that these lives will end, while we start a journey to find abundant and eternal life through the love of God in Christ.

So on this VaLENTine’s Day let us take inspiration from some of the traditions about Saint Valentine.

St. Valentine

In the third century, two hundred years after the time of Christ, the Emperor of Rome, Claudius II, decided to bolster his army by forbidding young men to marry. But there was a young priest named Valentine who disobeyed the ban and performed marriages in secret.

When Claudius persecuted Christians for refusing to worship him as god, young Valentine visited those put in prison, giving them comfort and prayer. He visited the widows and orphans of those who were executed for their faith. He made friends with the children. He often sent kind and helpful letters to them with the signature “Your Valentine.”

Because he befriended those persecuted by Rome and he refused to worship the gods of Rome, Valentine was himself imprisoned. The children, whom he had helped, would go to his cell window and toss notes through the bars, expressing their love for him. These notes and his notes back to them were the first valentines.

Then on February 14 in the year 269, Valentine was executed. He lost his life because of his love for Christ and his persistence in the Christian way. But really Valentine did not lose his life; he found it. He found eternal life through Christ, and he found in this life the way of being blessed and righteous through loving acts for others.

Conclusion

Yes, there is a contrast between Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday. One can seem overly commercialized, overly romanticized. The other can seem overly morbid, overly remorseful.

And yet, put together they bring a tangible message about love and life. They remind us that real love is not about cherubs shooting arrows through hearts. Real love is about the joy we find when we give ourselves to another, even when that includes sacrifice and suffering. And the greatest expression of that kind of love we find in Christ at the cross. There we find real love and real life.

May this Lenten season that begins on Valentine's Day be a journey of experiencing God's great love for you. And may this Ash Wednesday be one of the most meaningful Valentine Days you have ever experienced. May the cross find its place in your heart. Amen.