

Quinquagesima 2021 – S Valentine's Day

14 th February Quinquagesima	9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling	II Kings 2 vv 1-13 p369 II Corinthians 4 vv 3-6 p1160 Mark 9 vv 2-9 p1012
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OLORD, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth; Send thy Holy Ghost and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee; Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. *Amen.*

Today is S Valentine's Day – a celebration of love. Like so many other celebrations, it is very different this year because of the pandemic. There can be no romantic dinners in restaurants or holidays in exotic locations. In fact, if you don't already live with the person you love, you won't be able to visit them even at home, though you can meet up outdoors for a socially distanced walk. Presumably, you can still send flowers or other gifts, and cards.

There is the custom of sending S Valentine's Day cards anonymously. What is that all about? I suppose the sender hopes that the recipient will guess who has sent it. Maybe sending an anonymous card is a means of introduction to someone to whom one is too shy to speak. I imagine that anonymous Valentine's cards could cause a lot of embarrassment, especially if people guess wrongly who has sent them. In fact, I can do more than imagine. I know – though not from personal experience, I hasten to add.

S Valentine's Day a celebration of love. It is a celebration of a particular kind of love. The Greek word for this kind of romantic love is *επος*, a word which does not appear in the New Testament, though that does not mean that romantic love is not a gift from God. Of course it is. *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.* (James 1¹⁷).

The two words which the New Testament uses for love are *φιλαδελφια* (*philadelphia*), which means *brotherly love* and the one we all know, which is *αγαπη* (*agape*). *Αγαπη* is usually translated *love* or sometimes *charity*, as in today's collect. Our English word *charity* comes from the Latin *caritas*, which the Latin Bible uses as the equivalent of *αγαπη*. *Αγαπη* is the word for love, both love of God and love of neighbour, in the Great Commandment. God is *αγαπη*.

In the Old Testament, as in English, one word covers all kinds of love – the love of lovers, family love, love for friends, love for our neighbours, God's love for us and our love for God. That word is *אהבה*, (*ahavah*). In Leviticus 19¹⁸: God says, *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. I am the LORD.* Why are we to love our neighbours as ourselves, because God is the LORD. He is the LORD and we are His people, called to be holy because He is holy, called to love because He is love.

There is no biblical word in either the Old or the New Testament for *like*. In biblical terms, you either love someone or you don't. There are many different kinds of love, but they are all aspects of love. Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Aspects of Love* is just about romantic

love. What the Bible means by *love* includes all kinds of love: God's love for us, our love for God, our love for our Christian brothers and sisters, our love for our neighbours, the love between husband and wife, the love which attracts a boy and a girl to one another and leads them onwards on the path towards making the commitment of marriage when they are as sure as they can be that they are making the right choice, our love for children and parents and all the members of our families, our love for our country, even our love for our dogs and other pets. Love is of God, because God is love. That is why *all our doings without charity are nothing worth, all our doings without love are nothing worth*. It is why *without love whosoever liveth is counted dead*.

What has all this to do with our readings? The answer is made poignant by the circumstance of the pandemic this Valentine's Day. We want to be with the people we love. We want to see them, to look into their faces. We want to touch them, to spend time with them. I once saw a young couple sitting on the seat in Cuxton churchyard. They were each on their 'phone texting, possibly texting one another. I thought that they were rather missing the point of being together. Nowadays, with the virus about, they'd be lucky even to be sitting on the same seat texting.

But Elisha kept close to Elijah. He knew that he would shortly be losing his friend and mentor. What he wanted was a double portion of the spirit which Elijah had in order to continue the great prophet's work. Elisha was rewarded with a vision of the *chariot and horsemen of Israel* conveying Elijah to heaven. He saw something of the glory of God and Elijah's mantle fell down to Elisha, God's commission to continue Elijah's work and the earnest of the Spirit which came upon him at the same time. At the Transfiguration of Jesus, three chosen apostles saw something more of His glory than was generally evident. *He was transfigured before them. And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow, so as no fuller on earth can white them*. Jesus has been called the human face of God. Many years later, the apostle John would write of the apostles' whole experience of Jesus in these words: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life*. The apostles had spent time with Jesus, seen Him, touched Him, heard His voice. They had been in the Presence of God. That's all pretty marvellous. But here comes the really good bit. What does Paul say in our epistle? *For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*.

We might be cut off from the people we love by the COVID restrictions, to a greater or a lesser extent, but we are in the Presence of God, the One Who loved us so much that He gave His Son to die on the Cross for our salvation, the God Who invites us, nay commands us, us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind & strength. We reach out to Him and touch Him as He reaches out to us. There is nothing and no-one which can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ.