

## **Valentine's Day**

*Ephesians 5.21–33*

*The historical information is from Simon Scott of St Andrew's the Great, Cambridge*

Today is Valentine's day, a day named for a Roman priest who was killed Feb 14th 269 AD, allegedly the victim of persecution by Claudius II. He was martyred on the day the Romans called Lupercalia, a holiday which involved, among other things, bringing young men and young women together. The Romans believed that birds begin to mate at Lupercalia, and some Roman writers mention the many signs of spring visible by that holiday—a part of Lupercalia we can't identify with in Pittsburgh! So what some of us do on February 14th is actually descended from an ancient Roman festival. The date appears to be the only connection between the real Valentinus and the theme of love; there's no evidence that he ever expressed any unusual interest in the subject.

So Valentine's day is not a Christian festival, in origin; but it is certainly an appropriate feast for Christians to observe, because it celebrates a real Christian joy, which is love between a man and a woman. So when Valentine's Day falls on a Sunday, it seems appropriate to remember some of the things the Bible has to say about love between men and women.

The first thing the Bible says on the subject—and it's almost the first thing the Bible says on

*any* subject—is this, on the second page of the Bible in the pew: ‘a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they will become one flesh’. ‘One flesh’ is one of those phrases or words that can be both metaphorical and literal at the same time: it certainly refers to the deepest physical expression of love, which is appropriate for people who are committed to each other for life in God’s sight. But it’s also a metaphor for the relationship that follows that union as months turn into years and years into decades. Jesus makes that metaphorical sense clear in his comment on the ‘one flesh’ verse which was in our gospel reading, v 8: *They are no longer two, but one*. Eventually husband and wife are so close that no one can imagine either of them without the other. They are one flesh. ‘A man leaves his father and his mother and *cleaves to* his wife, and they become one flesh’. ‘Cleaves to’ means ‘sticks to’, ‘never leaves’, and that’s what marriage is, when a man and a woman *stick to* each other, when they can’t be torn apart no matter how tough the going gets, bad times and good, sickness and health. And what we refer to as physical love is for people who promise each other, I’m going to cleave to you, I’m never ever going to leave you.

This married relationship is a Christian relationship. Not only did God design it to be that way from the very beginning, Jesus gave it his blessing when he performed his first miracle at a wedding, and when

He made His other famous comment on that verse about becoming one flesh: *what God has joined together, let man not separate*. This phrase really has two meanings, like so many of the phrases used by Jesus. First, it means that when a man and a woman have joined together in the sight of God, they should let nothing separate them. But it also refers to the fact that God has placed the physical union of man and woman, the relationship referred to by the literal sense of ‘one’ flesh, in the context of this lifelong relationship. God has joined sex and a lifelong commitment together. To have that physical union outside that lifelong relationship is also to separate what God has joined together, and Jesus says keep them together.

Because sex only within marriage is part of Jesus’s teaching, Christians have been accused of disapproving of physical love. And it’s true that some Christians who have some personal discomfort over the subject have confused their own feelings with Christian teaching: I’m told that in the Middle Ages, one church leader forbade sex on Thursdays because of the Ascension of Jesus, on Fridays because of the Crucifixion, on Saturdays in honour of Mary, on Sundays to celebrate the Resurrection and on Mondays out of respect for the dead. Which, presumably, meant that Tuesdays and Wednesdays were eagerly looked forward to by some people! But there is of course no biblical basis for such teaching, it’s just one more thing

that clergy have foisted on the laity, and which could never have happened to a laity which knew their Bibles and also knew that God's will is found in Scripture, not in the words of any priest! It was in those days that clergy were forbidden to marry; somebody had talked them into believing that this relationship, given by God, made people less holy. I call that not just unbiblical and therefore untrue, but a blasphemy against God, calling evil what God has called holy, the sin against the Holy Spirit.

There used to be a craze for bumper-stickers that say plumbers or pilots or whatever profession the driver of the car had make better lovers. The truth is that 'Christians make better lovers', because if we follow the Bible's guidance for love between a man and a woman, we will love each other more fully, more deeply, and become more and more one flesh.

Here's how the Bible says married couples are to express their love for each other, in v 21: *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*. 'Submit' doesn't actually mean 'do as you're told', which is how we often use it; it means 'put yourself second to'. Husband and wife are each to put the other first. That's God's plan for being a good lover. It's also a great way of making sure both husband and wife have all they want and need: when husband puts wife first, and wife puts husband first, they are both truly happy, satisfied at the deepest

level. When each puts themselves first, neither is happy, there is no satisfaction at any level.

Now my experience, having been called upon to try and help people in a number of marriages over the years, is that women generally react positively to this proposal, men generally don't. I know we're all familiar with the feminazis who froth at the mouth when they hear this verse, but believe me they are in the minority. Most women, when they hear the plan is to put each other first, find it something that immediately makes sense. The 'put your husband first' idea sounds easy to them when the husband is also putting them first. Most men, on the other hand, shrink from this. They want the wife to put them first, that makes sense, but they want to back her up by also putting the husband first. So let me end with a plea to husbands to take this seriously, if you don't already. And the only way to know if you take it seriously, by the way, is to ask your wife. Once when I reminded my wife that of course I put her first, she burst out laughing. They know, they know.

Here's the words Paul uses to describe it in this morning's scripture passage: *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. Put your wife first to the same extent*

that Christ put sinners first. Give yourself up for her. Not that you can make her holy, the way Christ's death gave sinners the chance to become holy. She doesn't need that, because Christ's done that for her already. Give yourself up for her for the reasons you promised in the marriage ceremony: so that she is loved, comforted, and honoured. The husband also expresses his intention to 'keep' his wife, which is sometimes thought of as paying her bills, but that's not what the marriage service means. It's just a reminder that you'll keep her if you truly love her, comfort her and honour her. And she is the only judge of whether she is loved, comforted and honoured. You may think she ought to feel like that given all the energy you've put into it, but it may take a little more yet. Check with her, she'll know. And wives, too, check with your husbands and make sure they know that you are putting them first. That's what it means to put the other first: to live up to their standards, not our own.

There's lots more in the Bible about love, which is what we should expect when we remember that God Himself is the greatest lover of all. He's so great that one of the first Christians even said 'God *is* love'. And those who love the great Lover are bound to be good lovers too—and not only good husbands and wives, but good lovers in all the other ways men and women are called to love: good sons and daughters, good parents, good uncles and aunts and grandfathers and grandmothers,

good neighbours, good fellow-parishioners, and becoming better all the time. The more we love God, the more we can love others. The more time we spend with Him, the better use we will make of the time we spend with others. The more we listen to Him, the easier it is to listen to others—and to respond in love.

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