

'My heart is fixed'

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent

The Collect for this morning: *O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men: Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

When Christians speak of the heart they are never romantic. The heart for the Christian is the place of decision making, of conversion. The heart is the centre of our personal gravity as it finds that true centre in God. For today, now, Jesus comes to tell us who God is. God in return tells us who we are. God had of course been the mysterious, unfathomable unreachable God of the past. Now Jesus beckons us into a relationship with Him. A relationship always implies mutual acceptance and belonging. Today's prayer asks that we may be given grace to love what God commands and to desire what God promises. This is no romantic or idealised love but the willing response to the love of God in which 'true joys are to be found'. It is in communion with God that we find our true selves and the true meaning of our lives. Amid the many 'changes and chances of this fleeting world', the collect continues in the hope that we may find our true rest in His 'eternal changelessness'.

In describing matters of the heart there is none more peerless than William Shakespeare. This is one of his songs, which was set to music by a contemporary, Thomas Ford. He speaks of 'fastness' in love which we relate to colour fastness or permanence and speaks of kindness in love rather than emotional outpouring:

The sun, whose beams most glorious are
Rejecteth no beholder;
And your sweet beauty, past compare,
Made my poor eyes the bolder.
Where beauty moves and wit delights
And signs of kindness find me
There, oh there, where'er I go
I'll leave my heart behind me.

No, no, no my heart is fast
And cannot disentangle.

'Since first I saw your Face', A song by William Shakespeare
Set to Music by Thomas Ford (1580-1648)

It is not a quaint or Elizabethan thing to speak about our hearts, our true heart's desires and where our hearts, the heart of us, our truer selves, really lie. Love will be as much about perseverance, of 'fastness' and determination, of courage and steadfastness and the

sharing of kindnesses as much as anything else. It will be selfless. What it will not be is romantic, in the sense of idealized self or over-the-top. What lies at the heart of us is God. Cardinal Basil Hume, former Archbishop of Westminster once said that 'in very human heart there is a God-shaped space', the place of our own truth telling to be realised amid 'the unruly wills and passions of a sinful humanity'.

This Tuesday, St Valentine's Day, tables will be booked, millions of red roses will be given to loved ones and vast amounts of special food will be prepared and chocolates and sparkling wine and champagne quaffed. And all because of love! The great big red heart will rule supreme. And many will receive anonymous cards or notes bearing the plea 'Be my Valentine!'. It's all a lot of fun but falls into the same trap as the secular Christmas in its hype.

Our three readings, coming from Old to New Testament through the writing of St Paul provide a direction finder or sat. nav. In the call to love. Deuteronomy reminds the reader to be 'steadfast', just like the words of Shakespeare. Paul reminds his readers that beyond their petty factions, personal vanity and this worldliness they are, nonetheless 'God's field; God's building.' They are his creation and part of his plan. God has made them and the love for his own creatures never ceases, even though they are 'still of the flesh'. Jesus points more radically to the love shown as conviction, rooted and grounded, faithful and fastened in proclaiming God's love for every generation. This is the pattern of his Passion and the evidence of his Cross as He himself is to be radically, lovingly obedient to God the Father's call, come what may.

It is more important than ever, when public debate over serious issues is overrun by personalities bearing opinions that are ill conceived and ill-advised or that are charged with more emotion than wisdom, more heat than light, that we need to keep our heads. Christians are not airy-fairy thinkers. Our view of life is tempered by the message of Christ which is God's love for this world and his care for every part of it. For we are being called this morning into none other than the complete Christian spiritual life which has and always will be tested by the world it inhabits and which in strictest terms, will call us 'out of ourselves' and beyond our own unruly wills and affections.

"A spiritual life grows as love finds its centre beyond ourselves. Faithful and committed relationships offer a door into the mystery of spiritual life in which we discover this; the more we give of self, the richer we become in soul; the more we go beyond ourselves in love, the more we become our true selves and our spiritual beauty is more fully revealed. It is of course very hard to wean ourselves away from self-centredness. And people can dream of doing such a thing but that the hope should be fulfilled it is necessary that a solemn decision be made - whatever the difficulties, we are committed to the way of generous love."

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