

“Love Is All Around” (February 2022)

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by Rev Paul Graham

As we're embarking on the second month of the year, it will not have passed the notice of the shoppers amongst us that Christmas paraphernalia has been replaced by racks upon racks of Valentine's Day Cards. Yes, we are in the season of heart-shaped chocolate boxes, the last Rolo (other final chocolate treats are available), impossibly fluffy cuddly toys emblazoned with promises of undying love and cards with messages ranging from the sweetly romantic to the downright sordid.

It's that one day in February where we're encouraged to tell our nearest and dearest how devoted we are to them, usually with the most expensive display of affection that our creaking post-Christmas wallets can endure. Or at least that's the message that suppliers of such extravagances would like us to believe. Nothing shows a person how much they are loved, seems to be the message, as the lovely necklace, flowers, watch, stuffed toy, dozen red roses (add your own to this non-exhaustive list) that are available from all good retailers (knock-off versions are also available from not-so-good retailers).

And if you think that I'm a bit cynical (a bit!?), then you're probably right. I've never been a great believer in Valentine's Day as an event, not least because it holds some unhappy memories for me. I was a frustrated Romeo throughout my school career, and still remember the bitter taste of rejection from finding a card that I had given to an intended future Mrs Graham (she vaguely knew of my existence, so I was probably on a hiding to nothing anyway) in a sorry state, all torn and crumpled, but only after she and her mates had enjoyed a jolly good laugh at my expense over the words of romantic expectation that I had composed in my best 14-year-old poetic style. Oh, the hurt!

Be that as it may, I understand that for many people, Valentine's Day holds a vast range of emotional responses, and not all of these are positive. There are those who feel the loss of that special loved one so keenly, or have never known such depth of emotion, or would rather do anything else than waste their money on someone else, or... the reasons are many and myriad.

But there are some for whom Valentine's Day is a special day, and far be it for me to ruin it for them. Good on you, I say! Enjoy the day, and enjoy showing those you love how much you care.

It only seems fitting, therefore, to spend a little bit of time on the theme of love, prevalent as it is in on this most auspicious of days. But not the romantic love of a thousand poems, but rather the love that comes into view a couple of weeks after the 14th as we prepare our pancake batter and stock up on maple syrup and lemon (though not on the same pancake – that would be barbarous). Because, once we've scraped the final pancake from the ceiling, we embark on the season of Lent that culminates with Holy Week, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and the greatest act of love that history has witnessed.

The decision of God to become fully human while retaining his fully divine nature is one that continues to exercise the largest of brains, so I don't pretend to understand it myself, let alone the mechanics of how it could happen. I'm happy to dip my toe into those deep waters and leave the rest to faith.

However, what I do understand is that humanity (of which I am a sorry and humble part) has an unerring tendency to take the idea of love and treat it in the same way as the recipient of my Valentine's Day Card all those years ago. Trampled, crumpled and torn; cast aside and laughed at – that's what love is. In word and deed, we are, as it were, anti-Valentines in our pursuit of personal gain, of making others feel worse as an excuse to make ourselves feel better. 'Twas ever thus, and 'twould seem to be the same forever.

But at Easter, the whole world was turned on its head as one person (admittedly at an advantage by also being God) showed the world that there was a way of love that put not just a few people first, but the whole of humanity for all time. At the time, there was an expectation that certain groups of people were worth looking after: Romans and their citizens, Pharisees and their families, etc. Just as we might give preference to certain people in our lives, with every justification and none.

There aren't any of us who even deserve such a generosity: God's gift of love in Jesus wasn't based on what we have achieved, or how committed we are to him, or how many times we show up to church on Sundays. Nobody in his day had done anything to earn the loving grace found at the cross, and nobody since that time has even got close. Not even the most worthy of the saints, bishops or Cliff Richard (sorry, Cliff).

It's a gift that we are each offered. The question is, are we going to treat it like my ill-fated Valentine's Day Card, roughly rejected without a thought for the giver? Or like a love-slogan-wearing teddy bear, given with love but not really of much practical use? Or like the true nature of love, committed throughout the year, able to withstand the pressures of daily life, holding true in sickness and in health, and ultimately worth the cost of grief and joy?

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13) These were among the last words that he said to his disciples before he enacted just that on the cross. What a moment when we realise that we are all counted as his friends. Now that's better than a thousand cards.