

SERMON FOR ASH WEDNESDAY | 14.02.2018

These Wednesday morning Masses are very precious to me and to the handful of people who come regularly. In the middle of the week – whatever else is going on or however we feel, we take our place around this altar and reflect together on whatever readings the Church has provided for us.

We always keep the regular saints days and in the way of things, on February 14th, we would have been celebrating SS Cyril and Methodius or possibly even St Valentine – Valentine the 3rd century Roman bishop and martyr who almost certainly wasn't involved with the practice of marrying off Roman soldiers to their fiancées on this day but whose date of martyrdom happens to coincide with the pagan lovers festival of Lupercalia. Closer to home it was Geoffrey Chaucer who was responsible for the popular English link between Valentine and romance: in his famous Canterbury Tales he refers to the way in which the birds are supposed to pair off on this day.

But of course this year, while the world is celebrating a very secular St Valentine's Day we will be focusing on the start of Lent – although it is good to know that increasingly, ashing is taking place out in the streets and at railways stations too.

So, Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day: is there are a connection that can bridge these two commemorations?

Listening to the radio this morning, I heard a reference to Jacob Zuma, fighting for his political life in South Africa. Asked if he was likely to quit the presidency easily, the commentator said he would 'fight like the Russians in Stalingrad'. He would dig in and defend himself with everything that he had.

While many are rightly praying for the people of South Africa at the moment I found this image of 'digging in' a powerful one. Because it sums up so much of the way that each of us leads our lives. It is always from our own perspective, placing ourselves at the centre of our known worlds. When we are criticized or when there are decisions to be made, we look after number one, sometimes with very little regard for how others feel or think.

St Valentine's Day is, of course, the very opposite of that. It puts love of another person at the centre, despite the fact that such loving may cost us – will cost us – a loss of money, time, argument or dignity. The options are infinite because our love is endless...

So to 'marry' Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday may be a quirk of the calendar but it is a happy accident.

It reminds us that we need to review the way we put ourselves at the centre of our worlds. As the ancient Irish litany we are to use in a moment says: *Forgive the harsh judgments I have made of others, and the leniency I have shown to myself.*

Loving others first is the hallmark of Valentine's Day. It is also the door to a new way of being as we start these 40 days of Lent.

Whatever discipline we adopt for Lent this year, I hope it won't just revolve around giving up some small luxury – which can so often be more a sign of the strength of our will-power than anything else.

Instead I hope we can each find a Valentine type sign: reaching out and loving those who we don't know very well if at all - and giving it all we have got so that our familiar post communion prayer really comes alive: *through Christ we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice...*

Living and loving - to the fullest.