

Competing festivals?

Here is an interesting quirk of the calendar this year: with Easter falling relatively early, Lent will begin on 14th February, which means that Ash Wednesday will also be St Valentine's Day. And when this is the case, which does not come around all too often, Easter will also be on the same day as April Fool's day. Now, on the face of it, this pair of coexisting celebrations seems to make rather uneasy bedfellows.

Valentine's Day is usually celebrated with chocolates and flowers, whereas Lent begins with fasting and remembering that all turns back to dust. Easter Sunday is the day on which all of the hope of the Christian faith rests with the unlikely, astounding, and surprising news that death could not finally hold Jesus in his earthly tomb. April Fool's day, by way of contrast, takes for granted that the surprise and amusement of practical jokes is generated by duplicity and misdirection.

I happen to think that that in both cases, the days share rather more in common than they might first appear. There are several competing hagiographies of St Valentine, and you wouldn't want to put any of them in a Hallmark card. One of the enduring myths is that Valentine lived during the reign of Claudius Gothicus sometime in the 3rd century. It was illegal to aid Christians during that period of Roman history, but Valentine married Christian couples in secret, hence his association with courtly love. When he was caught, he tried to convert Claudius, and as a result he was beaten and then beheaded. Not a pleasant story. But a story nonetheless that gives a certain perspective on Lent. There are the obvious parallels between the lives of any martyr and Jesus, with both meeting premature and seemingly unjust deaths. But there is also what their ministries represent, and what they were prepared to die for. In Valentine's case it was the bringing together of couples in marriage. In Jesus's body it is the bringing together, unbreakably, heaven and Earth; humans and God. There is a reason why the Bible uses so much wedding imagery for our arrival in heaven. It's because Jesus is God's way of saying you are mine, till death do us part, and even that won't be enough to separate us. That's the kind of love we celebrate in Lent.

What might be the connection between Easter and April Fools day, then? Maybe this: both days are in their way about turning the world upside and realising that things are not as they might first seem. It looks like the cross is the end of the story for Jesus. It looks like the disciples are the fools, that they have been duped into following a path ends violently and abruptly. It looks like death has the last word after all.

But it doesn't. Early in the morning, as brave women seek his body, things do not feel right. Have the Romans taken it away? How was the stone moved? Why was the valuable linen left behind? And then one word changes everything. He stands in the garden and speaks her name: "Mary." And the world is truly, completely, eternally changed. God, so to speak, has the last laugh.

I wonder if God's love has the capacity to turn your world upside down? St Paul wrote, "the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18). Could it be that as God makes a fool of death, God might make a disciple of you? Maybe this is the Lent and Easter to discover quite how loved you are.

— Robert Glenny