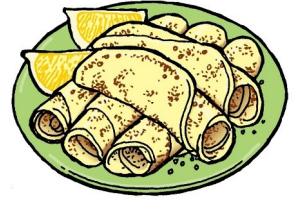


A message from Revd. Malcolm Strange

Rector of the Fromeside Benefice

Last night my wife conjured up the most amazing 'Shrove Tuesday Fest' of both savoury and sweet pancakes, and with a Bottle of Prosecco it became our pre-Valentine's celebration. You should have deduced by now that I am writing my article this month on Ash Wednesday, which in 2024 happens to also be St Valentine's Day as well.



This makes for an interesting dilemma and challenge for the purist. Having to hold in balance a day when, especially in the secular world, we celebrate the wonderful gift of Love, alongside a day of fasting, penance and reflection, as Ash Wednesday is kept by the Church, marking the start of the season of Lent and the journey to the Cross and beyond.

The truth is that these two celebrations have more in common than divides them, with unconditional love being at the heart of both. On Ash Wednesday, Christians are marked on their foreheads with the sign of the cross, it helps them to focus on God's unconditional love for his creation, a love which leaves Jesus his son making the ultimate sacrifice for us all in his crucifixion on Good Friday. It is a cosmic moment when all humanity is reconnected with the 'God of Love' for all eternity. St Valentine knew this better than most and in the year 269, on the 14th February, made the ultimate sacrifice himself when martyred for his faith in Jesus Christ.



The truth is that 'Love' is at the heart of both celebrations so holding them in balance is fine, celebrating the love of someone special to us, in our Valentines Cards and acknowledging the love of God in the mark of the ash on our foreheads.



The Greek word for love 'Agape', is at the heart of the Christian faith and teaching. This is a tough and sacrificial love; it requires us being selfless rather than selfish, to act in a counter intuitive way when facing issues, putting ourselves second to the needs of the vulnerable and the marginalised; it is about going the extra mile to secure peace and reconciliation when people are divided; it is seeing good in others and rejoicing in their gifts rather than pointing out fault or blemish.



So, as we journey through the season of Lent once more this year, let's hold onto this gift of love, reflecting it to all whom we meet. In doing so our world will be blessed, at a very dark time in its history, with the spirit of a true 'Valentine Love' and hope, peace, joy and love will be in abundance for all people.