

Today is the 14th of February, commonly called St. Valentine's day. Let me start by asking you who was St. Valentine? Actually, that's a trick question because Valentine is the name of several martyred Saints in the early church. All we know of the Saint who was buried in Terni, north of Rome on February 14th many centuries ago is that....well...he was called Valentine.

We can be certain of one thing, though. No sooner have the supermarkets cleared their shelves of Christmas stock then they are filled with items associated with love; with heart shaped chocolates; rose champagne and the iniquitous Valentine's day cards declaring that not only is love a many splendoured thing but also love changes everything.

Yes, today is the day we celebrate love.....which you might think seems a little at odds with today's reading of Jesus healing a paralytic man which is universally acclaimed as a wonderful illustration of faith of four friends in action, and yes, it is. But it's also a story of love in action. Let me explain by setting the scene.

Jesus and his disciples have returned to Capernaum from one of their trips around Galilee. Obviously Jesus' reputation had preceded him and a large crowd gathers into what most commentators think is Peter's house. No social distancing here, so there's little wonder they are enthusiastically crowding around Jesus.

The majority of the crowd are there to welcome Jesus. They have heard about his wonderful teaching and how he had healed many people suffering from all sorts of diseases and disabilities and cast out many demons. They have been amazed and astonished at some of the stories they have heard. This is really good news to hear.

But there is one section of the crowd who is hostile towards Jesus. They are the teachers of the law, which in Jesus' time meant the religious law. They are amazed and astonished too, but because they believe what Jesus is saying and doing is nothing less than blasphemy.

Indeed there are so many people eager to see Jesus there are too many to fit into the house and the crowd continues to press tightly together outside blocking the front door.

Into this situation comes four friends carrying a paralytic man on a stretcher. There's no record of what caused the man's paralysis. Was he born like that? Was it a result of a fall? Was it because of a debilitating illness?

There's no record either of what motivated the men to bring their friend to Jesus; we can only speculate. Was the man their brother? Was he the son and nephew of the friends? Had one of them been present elsewhere when Jesus had healed someone? Whatever the circumstances, whatever the relationship, whatever the motivation, they were determined to assist the paralyzed man.

First, they tried and failed to get the stretcher through the crowd, but no-one is willing to stand aside and let them through the door. But this didn't deter the friends. They are not willing to give up. They decide to access the roof, probably by an outside staircase which was common to houses of that time. That would have been no mean feat. If you've ever tried helping someone else to carry something up the staircase to the church tower you'll know exactly what I mean.

Simply keeping the stretcher level as they went up the steps would have taken a good deal of strength, co-ordinated movement and ensuring the man was always held firmly in place. At the same time, the man literally, was putting his life in their hands.

1. **That reminds me - Love always finds a way, love always protects, always trusts, always perseveres.**

And once on the roof. Well, if they were anything like Jon and me there would be a lovely Laurel and Hardy scene. *Pass me the pick axe, Terry. What pick axe, Jon? The pick axe to dig a hole through this roof. Do you mean the pick axe that we left in your garage? That's another fine mess you got me into, Terry. I'm sorry, Jon.* It would take time to open up the flat roof, to find the right spot between the beams and break a hole through the surface made from mixed clay and sticks. It wouldn't happen immediately.

2. That reminds me - Love is patient.

They lower their friend and they witness their friend healed miraculously by Jesus and I wonder what their reaction was. Did they dance up and down with joy? Did they shout aloud and hug each other? Or did they just stand their in awe as Jesus' power and love responds to their determined actions?

3. That reminds me - Love never disappoints. They certainly had not disappointed their friend.

Maybe it was at this point that it began to dawn on them that their actions would have consequences. Who was going to pay for the damage? Who was going to suffer the inconvenience of sorting things out and quietening down the possibly enraged owner; after all Peter was known for his temper. Compensation would probably need to be paid at the very least.

And here in this one moment we can see the most profound expression of love. Love is sacrificial. The Greek word for sacrificial love is 'agape'. It is where love is unconditional, that it is always freely giving. It shows total commitment to do your very best no matter how people respond and regardless of the consequences to the giver.

4. That reminds me – God is love.

And what does this story tell us about the crowd? We know they were amazed and astonished when the man stands up. They make way for him to leave with his mat. But why didn't they make way for him when his friends tried to come through initially?

I'd like to think that my first response in that situation would be to stand aside and let them through. But none of the crowd did; they were too intent on not missing out on what was being said.

5. That reminds me - Love is kind; it is not self-seeking. Love puts the needs of others first.

Do we always do our very best? Do we persist when our first attempts are thwarted. Do we put the welfare of others before ourselves, regardless of the consequences? I'm not even sure that I could say an unconditional yes to my own questions. It's almost as if I'm on that stretcher; that I'm still learning slowly what it is to lived loved.

But this story, on this St Valentine's day, reminds me that one of the best ways, if not the very best way, to learn to live loved is by recognizing the love that is freely given to us; not only by God, but by our friends and families too.

I was going to throw in my favourite lyric from Les Mis 'to love another person is to see the face of God' but maybe other song writers have got it right too: love is a many splendoured thing, love changes everything and as the Beatles once sang: All you need is love.

Thank you, Lord of Love. Amen
Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 14/2/21