

Wednesday 14th February 2018 (Ash Wednesday)

St Faith, Havant

7.30pm – Parish Mass

Joel 2.1-2,12-17; 2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10; St John 8.1-11

What day is it today?

For many people, maybe even most people, it's Valentine's day. A day all about love. For some people, that can be quite painful; a sharp reminder of lost love or loneliness. For others, it seems to involve expensive and frankly often quite tacky gifts, and perhaps a night out at a restaurant that's somehow far more expensive today than it was yesterday. For a lot of people, it's probably neither of those extremes, but somewhere in between. But for good or ill, it's a day all about love.

Meanwhile, for us Christians, it's Ash Wednesday. The last time Ash Wednesday was on 14th February was in 1945 (though by a strange quirk of the calendar it will happen twice more in the next twelve years!). While most of the world is talking about love, we're in church going on about sin and repentance, ashes and death. Depressing and miserable, and the opposite of the love and joy that most people are focussing on right now.

Except it's not the opposite at all. And though today is a very serious day, it shouldn't be at all depressing. Because, just like Valentine's day, Ash Wednesday is all about love.

The call to remember that we are dust, and that to dust we shall return, that powerful reminder that death will come one day to each and every one of us, is also a call to remember that through God's love, death is not the end. The call to turn away from our sin and to turn to Christ is also a call to remember that we can do so in the confidence that through God's love, there is no sin that cannot be forgiven to anyone who truly repents. The woman caught in adultery was not condemned to death by Jesus not because her sin did not matter, but because her sin was not beyond the reach of God's love and forgiveness.

God's forgiveness is greater than our sin, and God's love is stronger than our death. Today we are brought face to face with our sins not to be shamed by them, like the scribes and Pharisees were, but to know with that nameless woman that our sins can all be forgiven – if we heed Christ's call to turn away from them. Christ does not condemn the woman to a helpless death, but he does command her "do not sin again".

Today we will be marked, visibly marked, as sinners who will all die. But we are not marked to make us depressed and miserable, we are not marked for our own condemnation. For we are marked with the sign of the cross, the sign of God's love writ large with open arms, of love that does not spare itself. We begin Lent in penitence and sorrow because we know that it ends at the glory of the cross and the joy of the empty tomb. We recognise our own death because we know the promise of eternal

life. We confess our sins because we know that we can turn away from them and turn to Christ.

When we choose to be marked tonight as sinners bound for death, we are not marked for condemnation. We are marked as testimony that in the love of God, in the love of Christ, in the love shown forth so powerfully on the cross, there is no condemnation for those who unite themselves to that love. We are marked with the cross to remind ourselves that when we truly turn away from our sin and turn to the crucified and risen Christ, we will find forgiveness without limit and love beyond our imagining.

For today is 14th February, Ash Wednesday. It's a day all about love.