

LOVE

Choir – True Love – Cole Porter

February is the month in which we commemorate St Valentine, a Roman priest martyred in the 3rd century, whose name is forever associated with lovers and love. So today we celebrate love, human and divine, love in all its glory and pain:-

Let me not to the marriage of true minds: Shakespeare

Sonnet 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no, it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

And in similar vein this sonnet by Elizabeth Barret Browning:-

Sonnets from the Portuguese XLIII

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, - I love thee with breadth,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! - and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

Choir – Love one another – Wesley

From Shakespeare's and Browning's idealisation of human love to a rather more down-to-earth description of love's power, the ability to unite people together, warts and all, and to enable people to accept one another as they are. 'Love's Insight' by Robert Winnett:-

Take me, accept me, love me as I am:
Love me with my disordered wayward past;
Love me with all the lusts that hold me fast
In bonds of sensuality and shame.
Love me as flesh and blood, not the ideal
Which vainly you imagine me to be;
Love me, the mixed-up creature that you see;
Love not the man you dream of but the real.
And yet they err who say that love is blind.
Beneath my earthly, sordid self your love
Discerns capacities which rise above
The futile passions of my carnal mind.
Love is creative. Your love brings to birth
God's image in the earthiest of earth.

Choir – My beloved spake – H Purcell

Robert Winnett's poem reminds us that love can be a wonderfully creative and redemptive force, making us better and more worthwhile people than we were before. And that is because human love points to and reflects a divine love, God's love in creation and made flesh in Jesus Christ, the love that beats the very heart of all that exists, and which St Paul celebrates in his great hymn in his letter to the Corinthians:-

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic Powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in

part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Choir – Ubi caritas – Duruflé

A well-known hymn goes “My Song is Love Unknown, my Saviours love to me, Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be; O who am I that for my sake, My Lord should take frail flesh and die?”

The power of divine love is that it is unconditional and all-encompassing, accepting us for who we are, even when we fell unacceptable and unworthy. No-one has expressed that open-handed generosity better than George Herbert in his poem ‘Love’:-

Love (III)

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.

‘A guest,’ I answer'd, ‘worthy to be here:’
 Love said, ‘You shall be he.’
‘I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.’
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 ‘Who made the eyes but I’

‘Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.’
‘And know you not,’ says love, ‘Who bore the blame?’
 ‘My dear, then I will serve.’
‘You must sit down,’ says, ‘says Love, ‘and taste.’
 So I did sit eat.

Choir – Love Bade me welcome – Vaughn Williams

It is human love's ability to ‘discern capacities which rise above the futile passions of our minds’ and to bring them to birth, that makes it a true reflection of divine love, the love that invites us to sit at God's table and eat. Such love beckons us to follow, and invites us to share its tenderness and vulnerability. That is the ‘true love’ which we celebrate on the feast of St Valentine.

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