

“Love and Suffering”- 14th February 2010. Rev John Clifford

Today is Valentine's Day. It is also, this year, New Year's Day in the Chinese Calendar: Welcome to the Year of the Tiger.

Valentine's Day and the sending of messages of love is clearly a good example of commercialisation of a Saints Day. When I was a child growing up in the USA it was always secret and anonymous messages that were sent. Sending messages of professed love goes back perhaps 200 years when the refurbishment of a minor Christian saint wound up becoming the focus of a world-wide business plan. Starting with handwritten notes, it moved to the purchase of gaudy and sentimental expressions of romantic love. It is now, perhaps inevitably, moving on to the exchange of gifts and tests of earnestness. And it has moved well beyond its original Christian roots: When Barbara and I happened to be in India on Valentine's Day 8 years ago (on our Honeymoon) we went to a special Valentine's Day meal, at McDonald's in Delhi, with candle-light and soft music. Barbara was even able to buy a Valentine's Day card at a local Market.

I am not a Valentine Grinch: Romantic love has its legitimate place in the broad spectrum of emotions and actions connected with love, but it should have a valued minority place. The central focus of true love needs to be based in Reality, not idealised images, and the Reality of this world includes Suffering. Interestingly, the stories of Saints Valentine (and there were at least two, possibly three) incorporated the reality of suffering into the stories. So it's not the basic myths that have ignored the reality of suffering, but the way these myths have been commercialised. Essentially, tragedy doesn't sell, glamour and sparkle do, unless you can tap into underlying feelings of guilt, which some products do.

Having recently spent almost 5 years in Wales and being married to a Welsh woman, I came across the story of the Welsh St Valentine, a woman known as Santas Dwynwen. She's a minor Welsh heroine, currently in process of a face-lift. There are many reasons why you probably haven't heard much about her in Scotland, the chief one being that her Saint's Day is 25 January, when we are busy celebrating our Great National Hero, Robbie Burns.

But before I tell you Santas Dwynwen's story, some thoughts about heroes and heroines. Religious and secular communities need heroes and heroines. As a religious community we exist to promote lives committed to spiritual and ethical values. It is often useful to abstract a value from its context for examination, but this examination is faulty if it does not re-connect with its implementation in ordinary experience. One way religious communities do this is to make heroes/ saints/ avatars/ messiahs out of folk whose lives exemplify some important part of being more fully human. Sometimes this process is firmly grounded in fact (more likely some thin slice of it), often times it is based more on tradition, story and development of myth with little historical foundation. And there is a conundrum: The more single-issue you make your heroine or saint in order to illustrate an important teaching, the more they are de-humanised and removed from ordinary human experience. Getting the balance right can take generations of development.

To digress for a moment on one example of lost balance. We've had news in the past couple days of an evangelical Bible-believing group who are trying to re-establish female submissiveness in relations, not on the basis that human nature somehow would be improved (although they say that would be the result) but on the basis that it is Biblically mandated. Tradition divorced from the real exploitation of women around the world. These Biblical literalists want to reverse the social progress made in bringing women's voices into the decision process of society. You won't get that message in a Unitarian Church.

There are those who delight in showing that saints have feet of clay, but this is often to miss the point. Saints and heroines are not intended to be fully rounded perfect beings. So Martin Luther King was a womaniser and Mahatma Gandhi had kinky ideas about exposing himself to temptation in order to conquer it. But they both were important leaders who brought a deeper understanding of love and commitment to the struggles to free their peoples.

Having annual festivals or rituals connected with these saints is one way of periodically reminding ourselves of the values they have come to represent.

Reaching into myths and legends has sometimes been a very creative process, indeed. In the USA the establishment of Thanksgiving Day as a National holiday about the time of their Civil War used aspects of history very selectively, skipping over the mistreatment of the native Americans both by the colonial settlers and their subsequent generations. The westward expansion brought with it an almost instant rewriting of history portraying Indians as savages whose land didn't really belong to them so taking it wasn't really theft on a massive scale. Last December we once again came through one of the most developed and abused cultural celebrations surrounding the birth of the Prince of Peace. The myths and stories surrounding Jesus's birth and subsequent development of Christmas celebrations around the world quite intentionally incorporated unrelated local celebrations in an effort to make the celebration more inclusive. But the commercialisation of Christmas as more folk got disposable income and more other folk thought of ways to part them from their hard-earned cash hasn't really brought many to a closer appreciation of the values that Jesus sacrificed himself for. Iolo Morganwg, the Unitarian who devised / created the rituals connected with Bardic events at the annual National Eisteddfod in Wales, quite shamelessly distorted historical reality to serve his needs. And of course, here in Scotland some 90-95% of the history of wearing tartan was an instant expansion of myth around the visit of the germanic British King to Edinburgh orchestrated by Sir Walter Scot.

Secular holidays, too, have been variously established, intending to remind us of certain important values: World Aids Day; United Nations Day; Human Rights Day; Mothers' Day; -- now this last on the list is interesting. Established in the US as a Mothers' Day of Protest Against War it is now the biggest American holiday after Thanksgiving and the protest element has completely disappeared. And, like many things American, it has jumped the Atlantic and arrived on our shores and even now is assimilating our own mid-Lent Mothering Sunday.

So, to Santas Dwynwen: As slowly increasing numbers of Welsh are discovering, they have their own Valentine: Santes Dwynwen. In the interest of promoting cross-Celtic understanding, I'm going to tell you a bit about this Welsh holiday now being promoted by

the Welsh Assembly as the Welsh Valentine's Day. Much of the following comes from the Web:

St Dwynwen is the patron saint of Welsh lovers and lived during the 5th century. She was said to be one of 24 children fathered by the then King of Wales, Brychan Brycheiniog of Brechon (Brecon). She was renowned to be both very religious and pure and was also said to be enchantingly beautiful. As the legend goes, one evening Dwynwen's father held a feast where everyone attended in the finest attire to eat and dance the night away. At the feast, Dwynwen's beauty captivated the attention of a young prince by the name of Maelon Gwynedd. He fell in love with her immediately and soon made clear to Dwynwen of his desire to marry her.

There are several versions of the story: 1. Dwynwen returned her love but couldn't marry Maelon as her religious beliefs had encouraged her to become a nun. 2. Brychan refused consent due to his dislike of Maelon. 3. Brychan refused consent due to arranging for Dwynwen to wed another suitor.

Consequently, there are several outcomes following the above: 1. Following her father's refusal, Dwynwen is asked by Maelon to run away with him to his court. Dwynwen rejects this, which angers Maelon who leaves never to return again. 2. Some versions claim that Maelon was so outraged by Dwynwen's chosen life of a nun (or by Brychan's refusals) that he raped and left her. 3. Some versions say that Maelon simply 'goes away' after realising that he and Dwynwen will never be together.

Dwynwen's sadness impels her to console herself in the woods nearby. There she prays to God to rid her of her feelings for Maelon. In the version where she is raped Dwynwen prays for help to 'forget' Maelon. Answering her prayers, an angel visits and gives her a potion to help rid her of her feelings or make her forget Maelon. Unfortunately, Maelon drinks the same potion and is turned into ice. Some claim that Maelon was turned to ice as a direct result of Dwynwen drinking the potion. This would probably be apt in the version where she was raped. Dwynwen is horrified to learn of Maelon's misfortune and again prays to God, who answers by granting her three wishes: 1. The first was to have Maelon thawed and brought back to life. 2. The second was that God would look kindly on the hopes and dreams of true lovers whilst mending the broken hearts of the spurned. Most versions claim that Dwynwen requested this to be done through her, therefore making her a patron saint. 3. Her final request was that she was never to marry nor have the desire to do so in order to devote the remainder of her life to God. She then became a nun and settled on Llanddwyn Island, off the west coast of Anglesey, where a church or convent was founded. It is said that it was joined by many a broken hearted woman. Dwynwen's most known saying was "nothing wins hearts like cheerfulness".

Dwynwen died around 460 AD. The remains of a 16th century Tudor church in Llanddwyn are believed to be the site of the church founded by Dwynwen. The church and the nearby well have attracted pilgrimages over the centuries, particularly from young lovers. The water of the well was the home for a sacred fish (or eel) whose behaviour and movement predicted the future.

Recent years have seen an increase amongst Welsh people in the celebrating of St. Dwynwen's Day by exchanging cards and gifts such as lovespoons (another Welsh tradition). Special events such as parties and concerts are also held on the 25th of January, signifying a greater popularity of celebrating St. Dwynwen's Day amongst the Welsh.

So there you have it. The basic mythic story of a saint who embodies the determination, sacrifice, the loyalty associated with young love and a national tradition in the making. Romantic Love -- calling us to see and express the best in our loved one even if Reality is temporarily distorted/suspended.

But Love at its fullest deals with suffering compassionately. We all suffer personal loss and pain and we all suffer community injustice and inequality. To be compassionate is much more important than to be romantic, as most couples brought together by soft lights, music, and chocolate discover if they remain together.

As Dostoyevski put it: "Love will teach us all things: but we must learn how to win love; it is got with difficulty: it is a possession dearly bought with much labour and a long time; for one must love not sometimes only, for a passing moment, but always. There is no man who doth not sometimes love: even the wicked can do that. And let not men's sin dishearten thee: love a man even in his sin, for that love is a likeness of the divine love, and is the summit of love on earth. Love all God's creation, both the whole and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of light. Love the animals, love the plants, love each separate thing. If thou love each thing thou wilt perceive the mystery of God in all: and when once thou perceive this, thou wilt thenceforward grow every day to a fuller understanding of it: until thou come at last to love the whole world with a love that will then be all-embracing and universal." (end quote)

We need heroes and heroines; we need special celebrations -- the world is in danger of being seen as drab, dreary, and prosaic when it is really vibrant, varied, and creative. But we too often let our hearts get hardened to the beauty around us and wake-up calls to one aspect or another of our beautiful but suffering world are necessary.

But my closing basic point is: if peace is important to you, work for it all year round, don't just think about it on Christmas when you honour the Prince of Peace in ways he really wouldn't understand, or on Gandhi's birthday, or on Martin Luther King's birthday. If you really get upset at the sight of starving children, work for poverty relief and fair trade, don't just put a fiver in an emergency collection or the annual Christian Aid or Children in Need Appeal. If you really love and respect our natural world, do something about your daily energy consumption and our growing local problems with pollution, don't just go hug a tree in a ritual. And if you love someone special to you, sure, make the most of special occasions like birthdays or anniversaries or general cultural festivities like Mother's Day or Valentine's Day -- but also tell them that you love them regularly and frequently, not just on the special occasions. Amen