

## Feast of St. Valentine 2002

A woman woke up on Valentine's Day and turned to her husband and said, "I had the most incredible dream last night. I dreamt you gave me the most beautiful diamond necklace. It was amazing. What do you think it could mean?" The husband replied, "Just you wait until tonight and then you'll see." The two went off to work and came home and the husband handed his wife a wrapped box. "Open it," he said and with excitement she tore it open to find a book entitled: The Interpretation of Dreams...

This is the week we remember the feast of St. Valentine. But not really. The Church did away with it many decades ago because there were at least six possible stories of who Valentinus could have been and it was time to just admit there was really no person we could definitively say was St. Valentine. So no more feast day for St. Valentine. Just lots of stories. One of the many legends about a man named Valentinus is that during the reign of Emperor Domitian, who fiercely persecuted the Christians in the third century, Valentinus would secretly do Christian weddings, which, of course, were outlawed at the time. Couples in love would sneak away to be married by him. Perhaps not unlike Romeo and Juliet running away to be married by Friar Lawrence. Perhaps this is why he was martyred.

The original meaning of martyr comes from the Greek word for witness. One who bears witness is a martyr. The first apostles, those who were sent, were sent in order to bear witness to something they had seen – the love and power of Jesus Christ. Through the Messiah, people would now be able to live in such a way that was probably foreign to most of humanity. Until then, people needed to make animal sacrifices to feel they were ok with God, or the gods. Until then, people believed that achieving a list of do's and don'ts could connect us with our Creator and keep us in the Lord's favor. But now, the curtain of the temple had been torn in two and we all knew with certainty that every human being had access to God because we watched a human being do it. It meant that we had the power within ourselves to know God and be at one with our Creator, just as God had intended. That was good news for the whole world. But who was going to share this good news?

Our reading from Second Esdras today paints a picture of a time when those who would be courageous enough to spread the good news that the Son of God had changed the world, would be rewarded with a crown of glory. Why a crown? Well, if we listen carefully to the gospel, standing up for Jesus can be a terrible thing. In the time of the apostles who would be the first to try on a new way of worshipping God, this could be blasphemous and cost them their lives. Just as it does for the first martyr to lose his life, Stephen. But it could also put their everyday lives in jeopardy. Who has ever switched from being Roman Catholic to Episcopalian or changed faith practices altogether? How did that work out? And in this day and age, this is often considered just a different shade of grey.

So tolerating the emotional and even physical pain that might come from witnessing to the love of Jesus Christ could be quite intolerable. Those who could withstand it, the prophet Ezra says will be crowned with glory. But not just any crown. One given by the Son of God in person. This is the notion of Christian love. It is self-sacrificial but the sacrifice is crowned with glory.

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Certainly, each of us has made sacrifices to witness to the love of Jesus Christ and certainly we have all experienced a crown of glory.

A simple example is that you are here today. We all know what's going on out there: people are sipping coffee at home or at Starbucks and lounging about or out for a hike, or just sleeping in. Maybe they're eating a donut: mmm, sleeping in with a donut. But we are here and hopefully it is for a good reason, but at a bare minimum, just by showing up today, we are serving as witnesses. We are martyrs. Thinking about donuts and coffee until this sermon is over certainly makes one feel like a martyr. And for this effort, this morning, for all your suffering and sacrifice while others lounge about, what is the crown? I hope it is a bit of peace, hope, and joy. I hope it is the great company of all the other saints who are sitting around us. I hope it is a bit of transformation that gives a bit more of a taste of heaven.

Another example of Christian love might be how so many make a sacrifice of generous giving to St. Mark's and other worthwhile causes. We can choose to do any number of things with our money. When we choose to give it to God by contributing to church or worthwhile causes that help make the world a better place, we decide to say no to other things in life which many others have not sacrificed. Maybe you could have had that car but settled for this one. Maybe you could have had this vacation but settled for that one, or went on no vacation at all. Certainly while others are doing what they will, we stand in contrast as those who make a special kind of sacrifice. This makes us witnesses every time someone says why don't you buy this or go there and we say well, maybe, but it's important to me to give to my church. Now, what is the crown of glory when we sacrifice like this? I speak for myself when I say how good it feels to give to those who need funds from our discretionary account and when I see the good people of AA using our space to support one another, and when I see the students of this campus look to us as a reliable resource and community. That sense of satisfaction can't be purchased. It is a crown of glory given by the Son of God.

And we can go on. Certainly there are instances in everyone's life where, through an encounter or months of long, hard work, where people's lives have been changed for the better, or the balance has shifted towards the good even just a little. Each time we do this, Christ is honored and we are martyrs – witnesses to the love of God in Jesus Christ, and we receive our crown.

As we leave this place and go about our week, this the week of St. Valentine's Day, we might do ourselves a favor to remember the cloud of witnesses who have gone before, and their example to us. Let them be a reminder of what true love is: to lay down one's life for another – to live in self-sacrifice for a greater good. In this we are not lost but found. In this we receive the crown of glory, placed upon our heads by the very Son of God.