

St Valentine

In all the years that I have been writing these articles, I have carefully avoided dealing with the topic that many people would regard as the most obvious one for February: the feast-day of St Valentine, on the fourteenth. But I don't think I can put it off any longer.

Valentine (Valentinus) was already a fixture in the liturgical calendar of Western Christendom when Christianity came to England at the end of the sixth century, and so he continued right up to the Reformation. In fact, even the Book of Common Prayer, which was understandably rather choosy about what feast-days it retained from the pre-reformation church, carried on listing St Valentine, and he continued as a prominent saint in the Roman Catholic Church until, in 1969, the Pope removed him from the general calendar, leaving him simply to be celebrated locally. Several other saints received the same treatment at that time, including England's patron saint, St George.

In the Calendar of Common Worship Valentine is listed as 'martyr of Rome, c. 269', although the entry is in italics, which means that it is simply a Commemoration, reflecting the modern recognition that we are somewhat uncertain about who he was and what he did. Legends abound, but these are from a much later period than the time of Valentine's life and have to be seen as stereotypical narratives created as embellishments around a figure about whom practically nothing is known.

The one recurrent feature in these stories that we can probably rely on is that he was an individual martyr – not, in other words, a victim of one of the mass persecutions that occurred in the Roman Empire from time to time. The first written evidence is his brief inclusion in a text compiled sometime between the mid-fifth and the mid-sixth centuries, although that, of course, implies that he was being remembered, with a considerable degree of reverence and popularity, from some time before that. His feast-day was established by Pope Gelasius I in 496, but biographical facts were lacking since Valentine was included among those 'whose names are justly revered among men, but whose acts are known only to God'. There has even been some debate about which saintly Valentine he was: local traditions give us several. But he is most commonly considered to have been the third century Bishop of Interamna (now Terni) in central Italy. However, details in the various stories of his personal confrontation with Roman authority, resulting in his martyrdom by clubbing and beheading just outside the Flaminian Gate of Rome on 14 February 269, are problematic from a historical point of view.

The association of Valentine's Day with the celebration of romantic love goes back to the Middle Ages. Chaucer's reference to it in the fourteenth century is the first instance we have; from France we know that lavish festivities to celebrate courtly love were held on 14 February in the fifteenth century; and in the same century references to 'my very sweet Valentine' in a poem by Charles, Duke of Orléans and 'my right well-beloved Valentine' in a letter from Margery Brewes to her future husband John Paston, show that it was by then a well-established tradition. Valentine cards are known from the eighteenth century, but it was with the coming of the penny post and the industrialisation of card production in the Victorian period that the commercialisation of Valentine's Day really took off. The modern phenomenon is a product of the consumer society of the post-war period.