

Valentine's day, 14 February

What happens?

Valentine displays are in evidence in many shops from the end of January. Symbols such as red hearts, red roses or cupids are typical. Themed gift of all kinds, cards, chocolates and flowers are on sale. Restaurants advertise for Valentine's dinner bookings. TV schedules are likely to focus on sex and romance and in the student world there may be Valentine's balls, dinners or discos organised. The personal columns in newspapers published on February 14th are filled with messages to curiously nicknamed lovers. The most widely observed custom is to send a card to a loved one – often anonymously. Apparently the majority of cards are bought by women, whereas flowers and chocolates are mostly bought by men. Valentine's Day is celebrated not only in the UK but in Australia, Canada, France, Mexico, the U.S. and more recently, in Singapore, the Philippines and Korea as well.

Background

This annual celebration of romantic love has its roots both in pagan Rome and in early Christianity. The original Valentine (there are three martyrs of that name recognised by the Catholic Church) was a 3rd Century Christian who is thought to have defied Emperor Claudius by marrying young couples in secret. (The Emperor wanted single men as soldiers). He was executed on 14th February around 270 AD. By declaring Feb 14th as the feast day of St Valentine in 496 AD, Pope Gelasius I may have been trying to 'Christianise' the pagan rite of Lupercalia, the Roman fertility festival which was celebrated mid February. Among other customs young women would place their names or love notes in an urn which were then picked out by the unmarried men of the community. However, if scholars are agreed on anything, it is that the origins of Valentine's customs are obscure. The association of St Valentine's martyrdom with romance may just as easily be of mediaeval origin, when it was commonly believed in England and France that birds began their mating season on February 14th.

The earliest extant Valentine's message was written in 1415. By the 17th century, such messages were becoming more popular and by the mid 18th century tokens of affection were exchanged by people of all classes. Ready made cards became common in the 19th century and today come second only to Christmas cards in popularity.

Check out Wikipedia or the following websites for further background information:

www.people.howstuffworks.com

www.newadvent.org/cathen/15254a.htm

Using Valentine's day for social events

Were the stories of Valentine as the romantic hero marrying young lovers in secret invented much later? Did he really fall in love with his jailor's daughter? Did the Pope want people to emulate true love for *Jesus* for which Valentine was *really* martyred? It is hard to tell at this distance. But certainly the occasion gives us a natural opportunity to introduce the themes of true love and marriage as God intends it.

The issue of relationships is obviously a sensitive one, so be prayerful and aware of the following issues as you plan your event:

- There may be marriages under severe strain in your group, with spouses left at home thousands of miles away.
- Many international wives normally live with their in-laws so experience greater independence while in this country. Once home, submitting to mother-in-law again poses a real challenge.
- Depending on nationality, many single students will expect their parents to arrange a marriage for them when they go home, which may pose real problems if that person has become a Christian here.
- It is not unknown for young women from cultures more chauvinistic than ours to come to study in the UK in order to find British husbands!
- An International wife may struggle with giving up a career and easy childcare options at home in order to come with her husband, thus putting the marriage under strain.
- Our own approach to courtship and our expectations regarding a marriage relationship are more determined by our western culture than we might think!
- The blatantly sexual imagery so prevalent in our media, and the standards of dress and sexual behaviour in our society are deeply shocking to those from more conservative cultures (and to us, I hope!) and may be equated with Christianity.
- We can help put the record straight by making sure that in our groups our behaviour to the opposite sex is above reproach. Accepted behaviour between genders varies according to the culture so be very careful not to either cause offence or mislead. With young and single team members especially make sure international friendships are only developed with someone of the same sex.

Interviews

Find a newly married Christian couple to talk through their wedding preparations and service and what it all meant to them. Print out an order of marriage service with the vows in full for everyone to look at.

“This year I plan to interview three team members – one who is getting married in two months, one approaching 40 years of marriage and one who is a widower and became a Christian after losing his wife. I hope to bring out what difference Christ has made in relationships or circumstances.”

Compare marriage customs

If your primary concern in your group is to build relationships and learn from one another, this can be a good, low-key approach to take. You could have a quiz about marriage customs from around the world (see sample) or, in a wives group, share wedding photos.

You will probably find you learn something new ...

“I wanted to put some red flowers on the tables of our café to set the tone for the Valentine’s night. Instead of getting roses, I opted for cheaper carnations, only to find that Chinese and Koreans associate these flowers with their mothers! They always give their mothers carnations on their mothers’ festival.”

Valentine customs quiz

This can be a great way to inform and entertain as well as gently introducing a biblical perspective on the topic of love. Questions can also explore Valentine's Day customs around the world (and the corresponding "White Day" marked in Korea, Japan and Taiwan.)

Multi-media

Only for those with the technology and creative expertise!

“We always do something for Valentine’s and usually decorate. Last year at our cafe we had a very successful multi-media presentation put on for us by a local church on the subject of ‘Looking for Love?’ It included songs, drama and power-point presentation. A lot of it came from ideas for a seeker service.”

Telling Stories

Story telling is an important part of many cultures. Perhaps different members of your group could be asked to share typical love stories from their culture. European fairy tales often include elements of love and sacrifice – consider how the huntsman killed an animal in order to save Snow White’s life, or how Gerda’s tears of love for her brother Kay melted the ice in his heart (The Snow Queen).

“I told the story of St Valentine and the jailer’s daughter at our group and you could have heard a pin drop! We then went on to talk about the ways in which we show love and that proved to be a very interesting discussion, especially with Chinese people. At the end of that, I read 1 Corinthians 13.”