

1st Sunday of Lent

Valentine's Day provides an annual occasion for children and adults to exchange cards, candy and gifts of love. The English poet Chaucer believed that birds chose their mates on this day every year, which is probably not true, but it may be what inspired lovers to start calling each other "My Valentine."

The life of St. Valentine is largely unknown. Two cities in Italy claim shrines of his martyrdom on February 14 in the third century. Some people think there were two Valentines, but others wonder if he started out as a priest in Rome and then became the bishop of Terni. Today the Vatican's official list of saints says that Valentine came from Rome, and his shrine is on the Via Flaminia near the Milvian Bridge. That bridge became famous in the early fourth century because Constantine fought a battle there against the Emperor Maxentius. Constantine saw a vision of the cross along with the Latin words *In hoc signo*, or "In this sign, [you will conquer]." He won the battle under the sign of the cross and then became a Christian, as did most of the people he governed. Whenever you see the three letters IHS as a religious symbol, you're seeing a reminder of *In hoc signo*, the power of the cross, the conversion of Constantine, and the battle of the Milvian Bridge - which may or may not be near the place where a priest named Valentine may or may not have been martyred, which may or may not have happened on the day when birds choose their mates, which may or may not have inspired the practices associated with St. Valentine's Day.

This day is very popular, yet it has many mysteries. The same can be said of love. The same can be said of faith.

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul stresses the importance of faith, and he opens the door of Christianity to everyone, no matter their former belief. He quotes from Deuteronomy, "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart." Then he shows how both those parts of the body connect to faith. "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." This sentence, Romans 10 verse 9, is very popular among Christians because it summarizes our reason for hope. If we believe, we will be saved.

We hear this passage in today's second reading at the beginning of Lent because it lifts our eyes toward Easter at the end of Lent. Paul summons us to two beliefs: that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead. On Easter day we will hear that Christ has been raised, but our belief in that message launches Lent.

According to St. Paul, faith is about saying with your mouth what is in your heart. That is also true of love. At times we say hurtful words to people we love. They do not match what is in our heart. As Deuteronomy implies, the correct words are only inches away. If we take a moment to feel them, we can say them. Words of love are the best Valentine.