

Celebrating Lent and Valentine's Day

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For my friend who has SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder), February and March are the dreariest months of the year. She just can't wait for Spring. I imagine quite a few of us can identify with her, but Valentine's Day and National Marriage Week, and starting the season of Lent with gusto, can splash the greyness with a little colour and sparkle.

Celebrating Marriage

At a time when marriage as an institution seems to be going out of fashion, why do we so rarely celebrate its joys, and let our families into some of the secrets of a lasting union?

We discovered one year that the wonderful Irish worship leader, Marie Lacey was in Lancaster on Valentine's Day and invited her to help us fête marital romance with a Valentine's Day Dinner Dance. Local journalists - radio and newspaper - were intrigued, claiming that romantic marriage was an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, surely? And they came to interview us. The publicity attracted a large number of couples I had never seen before, who "just happened to be looking for some way of celebrating their love".

Having had its pews removed, our church doubles as a hall, and was transformed by wrapping the pillars with fairy lights, then covering them with purple netting and red ribbons. The effect was extraordinary - as if they were floating. The walls were hung with red velvet, and the tables decorated with red cloths, flowers, sequins and candles. In fact, as he walked in, one church member was heard to say, "they've turned it into a brothel"!

We served a simple beef casserole, then an array of delicious puddings brought by church members. Marie Lacey was superb, alternately singing secular songs we could dance to, and doing a comedy routine that made us laugh together as couples. She ended simply with a love song for the greatest bridegroom of all - and it was incredibly moving.

Marriage can also be celebrated in families or small groups:

Get your children to design and create a dinner party occasion for their parents, setting the table, and cooking and serving a special meal.

Couples can spend some time writing each other a love letter - which may or may not be shared in public!

Alternatively, in a home group, couples could write each other letters of appreciation and read them out to one another. Or singles could share what they appreciate about the marriages they see.

Discuss with your children, or the children in your small group, what you think it is about your relationship that has made it stand the test of time, accompanied by photographs that reflect the high spots, and perhaps some of the lows of your relationship.

Or plan a weekend away without the children. Like a sturdy plant, romance needs time, care and cultivation.

Remember - when organising the weekend or overnight:

check the venue beforehand, or go on personal recommendation
also organise child and pet care.

Don't make it a surprise if your spouse doesn't like surprises. They may prefer

anticipation.

Be prepared to laugh. Peter and I only once had a weekend a deux. He pulled a muscle and wasn't himself. So don't hang all your hopes on it.

Lent

Lent is potentially an important time in the Christian calendar as a preparation for Easter - but its meaning seems to have become somewhat debased. Sorry - but dieting doesn't count as fasting! Nor giving up chocolate or alcohol so that it tastes doubly nice on Easter Day. Preparation days in the Christian tradition always seem a little ascetic - about giving up. In the Hebraic tradition they are positive. This is a time to put wrong relationships right, to get in touch with friends and relatives we have neglected for too long, to care for the poor and visit the lonely.

For reflection:

Which of my relationships have been blighted, neglected or cut short? What might I do to put that right?

Who in my neighbourhood could be lonely and would love a visit?

Try a small group "fast". Make it positive, ie each member decides to write a letter, make a phone call, visit elderly relative or friend, bake a cake, do some extra tasks for a single mum like the ironing.

Shrove Tuesday and The Feast of Esther

In many communities, it became a tradition to begin the Lenten time of abstinence with a public, carnival-style celebration, known as Mardi Gras or "Fat Tuesday". There is nothing like a communal letting your hair down every once in a while as an antidote to the stresses of our working lives, and Shrove Tuesday pancake parties are always a great opportunity to invite in the neighbours - especially Muslim or Hindu neighbours who love to see our Christian traditions.

The Jewish March-festival is the Feast of Esther, and there are some great ideas Christians can appropriate from the way it's celebrated. As the familiar story is read in the synagogue, the children clap and cheer for Mordecai, and for Esther, his adopted daughter, and hiss and boo and stamp their feet whenever that villain, Haman's name is mentioned. They wave rattles, and blow any instrument or home-made contraption that will make a rude belching sound. Many of them dress up as characters in the story. It's an occasion for total mayhem, both in the synagogue and out of it. I can't think of a single contemporary Christian equivalent, certainly not one that encourages this level of boisterousness.

But in small groups and churches why not explore:

Interactive Story Telling

Participation really makes any story memorable. Try it in families and small groups as you begin to tell the Gospel story in preparation for Easter.

Musical instrument accompaniment.

To accompany worship, make your own musical instruments. Fill empty tins, jam jars or boxes with small bells, or pulses such as chick peas or lentils. Or fill glasses with different amounts of water, so that they play a different note

when tapped with a knife.

Fancy Dress and Carnival

From mediaeval times, most people have enjoyed a dramatic re-enactment of Bible stories. Encourage the children to dress up as Gospel characters and be prepared to enact the entire Gospel story, either on a Holy Week small group night or on Easter Day. Or, if you are really ambitious, consider putting on a small Easter pageant in the church or its grounds.

Learning Styles

Remember, we all have different ways of absorbing information. Some of us learn by listening - particularly to stories, others respond better to visual stimulation, while others find that “doing” is the only way they remember anything. The church has tended to be stuck in the cerebral mould - appealing to the brain rather than the senses. Try to use a variety of practical ways to touch people’s imaginations.

Ice breaker for small groups (who have been meeting a while)

Tell each other two truths and one “untruth” about yourself. The others in the group have to guess which is the untruth.

A Simple, Celebration Valentine’s Recipe

Rich Beef Casserole

Serves 6

1k (2 lbs) best braising steak, cubed
2 large onions
250g (½lb) chopped mushrooms
1 tin chestnut puree - chop puree into pieces
450ml (15 fl oz) beef stock (made with cube)
1 dessertsp treacle

Chop and fry the onions, then add the meat until it browns. Add the rest of the ingredients and cook very slowly for 3 hours in a low oven - gas mark 2, 140 degrees, or in a slow cooker.

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