St. Valentine’s Day

My Vicar, who was responsible for teaching me to be a parish priest, said to me, "David, when you preach, preach about God, no longer than ten minutes, and don't talk about yourself." That was good advice and I have tried to follow it. But this morning, I am breaking my word to him by mentioning my days at school.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, I was at the Bede school in Sunderland, not far from where we lived. My father was a surveyor of metals in the Admiralty and was involved both in ship repairs and the building of warships and merchant ships on the Tyne and the Wear. We were heavily bombed. My school had to up sticks and we all moved - the boys' division and the girls' division, to North Yorkshire. The girls were up in the dales, and the boys’ division was in Northallerton, where the Grammar School found space for us and we shared staff. I was in the classics set with some delightful young people who lived locally and made a fuss of us.

One of them was a charming girl, known as Val, a keen sportswoman who seemed to play in all her school teams. My introduction to her was by greeting card, and whether it was signed or unsigned I can't remember, but it said, "Will you be my Valentine?" I knew who it was from. It turned out to be an interesting relationship. She sang in the local choral society; I was the pianist. She went to music lessons from the man who gave me organ lessons. You know the score. We were both involved in different levels of school life and social activities. A real Valentine relationship. A happy one, which continued by letter as I remember, though it petered out after some time. Perhaps she too had joined the forces, or maybe found a better Valentine. Relationships were a bit like that in the war years.

You may be wondering what this has to do with today. I was asked to take part in the service on February 10th and to preach. It was suggested that I should preach about St. Valentine. That sounds an easy task, but it has proved a very difficult one, because there were a lot of Valentines in the early church. It was a popular man's name at the time, both in real life and in the world of literature.

In the early church, and especially in the period around 260 AD, two Valentines hit the local headlines. One was a Bishop. He was very venerable and evidently full of wisdom. The Pope at the time realised he was a popular leader in the church and consecrated him Bishop of Teria. He was much sought after by those who wanted to sort themselves out, so he was good at giving spiritual guidance and advice.

Now the other Valentine, who lived in the same period, had become a convert to the Christian church and became a priest. He was known as someone who worked with Christians who fell foul of the state and were imprisoned. There are many like him around the world today: men and women who set out to bring justice and freedom of expression into their country, but find themselves thrown into prison and treated like the worst criminal offenders. Yet even in captivity, and denied basic human needs, they continue to proclaim their faith and try to live it out. For all that this priestly Valentine did for the church, he was

murdered, presumably by the Roman authorities. It reads a little bit like the murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral by the Knights of King Henry II.

So what's new, you are thinking. Remember T.S. Eliot’s play, "Murder in the Cathedral", from your schooldays. Remember today the very large number of people, young and old, who have been jailed for their faith and for speaking up for God and the Christian life. They need our encouragement and a host of Valentines to keep them faithful, strengthen their protests, and fill them and all of us with the hope that God's kingdom will surely come.

That is important, especially in these days when huge changes could happen to us all because of Brexit, and where we will stand in a different and, we hope, a friendly and caring world and a still great, or possibly greater, Britain.

So let those thoughts dwell in your minds. Remember the countless men, women and children who are locked up in prisons today for proclaiming a faith which is built on the virtues we treasure: Freedom. Justice. Equity. The right to speak out and be heard. You can make your own list - remember how fortunate we are in this country and thank God for those wonderful people who have given so much in the past to create the society we know and enjoy.

Thank God too for men and women like Valentine, who minister to those in captivity for their faith, and take huge risks in bringing them comfort and strength.

Valentine ventured all for his faith, and he evidently took great risks to bring hope and promise to Christians in prison. A priest to remember with affection, though sadly we know so little about him.