

Bishop Martin EADT Article January 2018



My wife and I have just celebrated our nineteenth wedding anniversary. Yes, we had a rather chilly January wedding.

Each year I have tried to give Jutta something that connects with the traditional gifts for the particular anniversary.

I remember being especially pleased to find a pewter goblet for our tenth – when the gift is tin.

But when you look at those lists they seem to jump from fifteen – crystal – to twenty – which is china. It took me a while to find a list that filled in the missing years.

Nineteen, it turns out, is bronze, aquamarine, and in Germany (Jutta is German), it is pearl.

Amazingly, thanks to Google, I have managed to find a gift that combines all three.

As I have been going through this process of finding out what the right type of gift would be, and then tracking down something that is (at least to my mind!) appropriate, I've noticed something else going on.

It happens each year. Somehow the exercise of thinking about and identifying the right gift for Jutta gets me thinking and reflecting about the gift of our marriage.

As I was researching nineteenth wedding anniversaries, I found myself thinking once again about our past year together, and where we are with one another today.

And it's not just me thinking on my own. The two of us together find ourselves talking about it in particular around our anniversary.

"I can't believe it's nineteen years" may be the starting point, but we talk about this past year, and what feels easier or what is harder.

We talk about memories, points of transition and times of challenge, as those in any loving relationship, whatever form it takes, will do together.

And when I think about our relationship on my own I find myself touching that place inside me of deep gratitude for the gift, and of course noticing once again those things I regret, things I've done or the way I've been.

Mostly that's about being too busy, less attentive, thoughtless, inconsiderate, and letting other responsibilities crowd out the most important gift in my life.

And that gift for us includes our children, and together we find ourselves reminiscing about their growing up (they are teenagers), marveling at who they are.

We wonder about their future too and look at a world that seems more complex and more troubled than when we were growing up.

But we are also aware of their hopes and aspirations – which includes, as they put it, sorting out the mess our generation has made of the world.

It's odd to think that all of this might flow from bronze, aquamarine and pearl – or paper or tin or crystal or diamond.

But anniversaries are one of those points when we may find ourselves thinking about what is going on in our lives, and what is most important to us.

For some of us, each anniversary has become poignant, a time of sadness, as we think about the one who is no longer by our side, the one whom we think about every day but do not see.

But even in the sadness we find gratitude for the love we have received and given, and which remains deeply part of us.

And now in a couple of weeks' time we will be marking St Valentine's Day. The shops are full of cards for us to buy, and the price of red roses will shoot up to catch us out.

Here is another event that has been taken over by commercialism, yet remains nevertheless a time when we might find ourselves thinking with gratitude about the love in our life.

It is a time to celebrate love – new for some and long settled for others – a time to reflect again about what is most important in our lives.

This year St Valentine's Day falls on Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent in the Christian calendar. Now there's a challenge! Feast or fast?

But I don't think it is such a contrast. Because what is Lent about, but a time to reflect about, think about, the love that is the source of all our love?

The fact that love exists, that it means so much to us, and that we know that in the end it is the most important part of our lives, is because we are made that way by the one who is entirely love.

I realise that God gets a very mixed press and the Church does not always help.

But I find myself increasingly going back to the simple and deepest truth, that God is love.

The love I am blessed with, in my family, with friends, for and from the people I serve across our county and beyond, this love is God's love for all of us, shared in our relationships and encounters.

This is true for our caring relationships and friendships, in whatever form they take for us.

So happy celebrations of love – happy St Valentine's Day, happy Lent, and if yours was a winter wedding too, happy anniversary.