



On your marks

The following special outreach event for families and children is set out in the same format as the outlines in the book *Footsteps to the Feast*. These days provide an opportunity to explore the Big Story of God's purposes for the world and its people, linking to Christian Feast Days and Festival themes. Many children and families either come irregularly to church now or have been disconnected from the Christian story for some time and so, being invited to a special half-term event such as this is one way to introduce the story to them. The following idea contains material for icebreakers, team games, drama and music. At its heart there is space for Bible storytelling, reflection and simple worship. The festival in question here is Valentine's Day, using it as an opening to pick up on the wonder of God's love for each one of us.

Get set

Read through the material below and select carefully the ideas that will suit the dimensions of your venue and the adults and children who you hope to invite to this event. You will need a team of leaders, including someone to be up front and others to take groups or be responsible for the workshops. In addition, there should be stewards, a registration team and additional helpers for the groups.

A children's or all-age event celebrating St Valentine's Day

Here are the sections for this event. Follow below:

- Introduction to the theme
- Bible Footsteps
- First Steps (ways into the event)
- Footsteps Chant
- First Footing (ideas for icebreakers)
- Footbridge (ideas for games)
- Best foot forward (telling the story)
- Footrest (snack and a drink)
- Footprints
- Footlights (drama ideas)
- Footnotes (music ideas)
- Fancy footwork (craft ideas)
- Foothold (an idea for worship and reflection)
- Footsteps to the Feast (a way to round off the theme)
- Stepping out to the Feast (ending with food!)

Introduction to the theme

Not much is known about St Valentine. He lived in the third century after Jesus and was probably a



bishop in Italy. He died for his faith during a period of heavy persecution. It is possible that Valentine was a doctor as well as a priest and this tradition is preserved in images of the saint that show him healing a sick child.

There is, however, nothing to connect him with the sending of valentines nor any of the other customs that go with this day. Instead the link seems to be that, according to medieval folklore, around the time of his feast day at the beginning of spring (in the northern hemisphere) birds begin to choose their mates. From this comes the idea of sending your 'true love' a card or present as evidence of your affection and intentions. It is, of course, a great excuse to test out some secret romances and also for the card companies to make lots of money and create a market between Christmas and Mothering Sunday! Plenty of bunches of flowers are sent at this time of year along with many boxes of chocolates.

The focus on a celebration of love does, however, offer a moment to explore God's amazing and unchanging love for us and for his creation. This is a love that cost God's own life when Jesus accepted death on the cross as the way to give to us all a fresh start and restore an intimacy with God that had been planned from the beginning. The truth that there is a God and that this God loves each one of us to bits is fundamental to the gospel message. It is this love that can inspire and enable the love between people, which St Valentine's Day traditionally celebrates, and so it is the best love story to tell as we pass on the gospel to our children on a day like this.

The Bible tells us that 'God's love never fails' (Psalm 136:1, CEV) and that God's love is 'more powerful than death and stronger than the grave' (Song of Songs 8:6). This is the story at the heart of the following resource as we explore a love that is stronger than danger, darkness or death. It is the love that Christians experience within their hearts as it is poured in by the Holy Spirit in response to our faith in Jesus (see Romans 5:5).

Bible Footsteps

The stories used can be found in Mark 4:35-41; Mark 5:1-20 and John 11:17-44. Why not use the retelling of two of these Bible stories as they appear in The Barnabas Children's Bible - see 'The storm on the lake' (page 238) and 'Life after death' (page 252).

First Steps

As the children arrive and are registered, put them into teams, depending on numbers and space available, each having a team base and team leader. Perhaps the teams could be colour-coded and the areas decorated accordingly with pictures of hearts, flowers, bows and chocolates that tie in with the traditions of Valentine's Day presents.

During this time, you could send some of them off on a treasure hunt looking for sets of symbols linked to love that you have hidden around the room. This could be done individually or in pairs. Cut them up and hide them. Include: an engagement/wedding ring; a bunch of flowers; a box of

chocolates; some lips (= a kiss); a Valentine's Day card; a heart shape.

Alternatively, gather the children together for a simple join-in game that involves keeping a heart-shaped balloon in the air using first only elbows, then knees, then little fingers then heads and so on.

Footsteps Chant

Here is a special Valentine's Day chant that you could use during the event as you move from one activity to another or if you want to call the whole group together at anytime. Initiate a simple clapping rhythm and then have the children echo each line of the poem after you, repeating it several times, varying pace and volume:

*We're on a special journey
To hear about God's love.
It's far stronger than anything
In earth or heaven above.*

First Footing

There are other symbols that could be used to talk about the love of God, which goes on forever and ever. The following group exercises pick up on some of these and have links to Brain Gym TM, which is used in many schools to help children think more creatively and clearly by integrating the left and right parts of the brain. Introduce some or all of the following exercises as an interactive workout to start your time together (as well as to use up surplus energy!)

1. Lift high the cross

A cross shape is used as a sign for love in the form of a kiss after a person's name on a letter. Of course, for Christians, a cross is also a sign of God's love to us – God's eternal kiss of love for each one of us. Explore the range of ways that a cross can be made and expressed with our bodies:

Cross arms out in front of the body in an X shape.

Cross fingers in front of the face in an X shape.

Cross over the right hand to touch the left elbow and then the left hand to touch the right elbow.

Cross over the right hand to the left hip and then the left hand to the right hip.

Cross over the left hand to the right knee and then the right hand to the left knee.

Touch the left earlobe with the right hand and then cross the left hand to the right ear lobe.

Repeat these movements fairly briskly.

Repeat them in a sitting position, including a new one of crossing over the right elbow to touch the left knee and then the left elbow to touch the right knee.

Repeat some of these movements sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Repeat some of these movements lying on your back with your hands crossed behind your head and from this position touch different parts of the body with your elbows, making sure it is always



opposite-to-opposite.

Repeat some of these movements with your eyes closed!

2. God's eternal love

Another recommended crossover movement is to make use of the mathematical symbol for eternity which is an 8 on its side... sometimes called a 'lazy 8'. You could accompany the making of this sign in the ways described below with the words 'God's love lasts for ever'.

Extend your right hand and with your index finger trace the eternity symbol in a large circuit out in front of your body. Follow it with your eyes, but do not move your head.

Repeat this but use the left hand.

Repeat this shape making it larger or smaller.

Follow an imaginary eternity symbol that you 'see', first close then far away, but without moving your head. Do this again with your eyes shut.

Swing both arms together in this eternity shape in front of the body, making it as big as possible.

Trace the shape with your fingers in the air in various places within your field of vision.

Lean your head on to your left shoulder, extend your right arm out and make the shape.

Repeat this, leaning your head on your right shoulder.

3. Reflecting God's love

God longs that his character, which is love, be seen and reflected in our lives. As the Apostle John puts it in his letter: 'We love because God loved us first' (1 John 4:19, CEV). What follows are various 'mirroring activities' linked to this idea, using opposite parts of our bodies. God's love similarly can integrate us to be the complete person God wants us to be.

Extend each arm out in front of the body pointing forwards. Simultaneously trace with the index fingers a particular shape on either side of the centre line of your body as you stand erect and still:

Trace a square as the shape of the Bible.

Trace a triangle as the symbol of the Trinity.

Trace a circle as a symbol of God's unchanging faithfulness.

Trace a star of Bethlehem as a reminder of God's coming as Jesus.

Trace a heart shape as a reminder of God's love for the world.

Repeat these shapes but change the direction in which you draw them.

You might like to try this but involve all your limbs! Lie on the floor on your back with your feet and arms pointing up into the air and then try tracing the shapes mentioned above simultaneously with each limb.

Footbridge

Here are some suggestions for simple games to play as a group on the theme of love.

1. 'Do you love your neighbour?'

In the Bible, the test of whether we love others is summed up by asking question 'do you love your neighbour?' Sit in a circle to play this game:

Have someone volunteer to be an interviewer, maybe with a pretend microphone. He or she is seeing whether people 'on the street' really do 'love their neighbour'.

If a child, when asked 'Do you love your neighbour?', says 'yes', then the people either side must swap places quickly. However, the child can decide to say 'yes, but'... and then add that it's only certain people that they really love. For example, they say 'Yes, but... I really love only people with head bands... blue socks... fleeces... black trousers... hair bobbles' and so on. As soon as anyone who fits that description is mentioned, then they must get up and change places with someone else who has got up. In the meantime, the interviewer can grab a spare place and a new person is left stranded as the interviewer!

Just have some fun. It is best to say that the answer can never be 'no' and it may also be useful to change the word 'love' to 'like' with some groups.

2. Living Letters

In groups of four, ask the children and adults, with help from leaders, to make their bodies into letter shapes that spell the four letters of some different words. The first word is HATE and then slowly, by changing one letter (one person) at a time into a different letter, the word can be turned to LOVE.

The Word sequence is: HATE-GATE-GAVE-GIVE-LIVE-LOVE

3. Relay love

Organize a relay game between teams in which they have to run from one point to collect from another a series of tokens and then bring them back in a particular way:

The tokens and the way they should be carried are:

- a hula-hoop: brought back twisting and turning it around themselves
- an artificial flower: brought back between their teeth (no hands involved)
- a cardboard cut-out of a large heart: brought back balanced on their heads
- a large X shape: brought back as they keep legs and arms crossed (and so are being forced to hop)
- a pair of lips made of thin paper: which the team member has to blow back along the ground without touching it

4. Love crossed

Play a life-size game of 3-D noughts and crosses. Divide the whole group into two teams and supply each team with a set of either crosses or noughts. The game is played on a three-by-three grid in between the teams. Each square on the grid must be large enough to take up to three people. The first layer of the 3-D game involves sitting on the floor for any who are carrying a nought or a cross;



for the second layer of the game those carrying the noughts and crosses should sit on a chair; and for the third layer others stand by the chair with their symbol. The idea is for one of the teams to get three in a row, horizontally, diagonally or vertically. You will need a referee!

Best foot forward

There are three possible stories suggested for exploring the power of God's love over everything that spoils our lives. Each is taken from the Gospels and after each one Jesus' friends and those looking on are amazed at God's power. Depending on the age range of your audience and the time available, tell one or more of these stories in this section of the event. Here are the stories:

Jesus calms the storm - Mark 4:35-41

Jesus heals a man who is plagued by voices - Mark 5:1-20

Jesus brings a man back from the dead - John 11:17-44

For each one of the stories there are already suggestions for dramatic ways of retelling them on our *Barnabas* website:

[Jesus calms the storm](#)

«page:Tomb Man=3566»

«page:A Living Deadman=3567»

Whether you tell one, two or three of the stories, bring it to a climax each time, building up to a simple punch line, namely:

God's love is stronger than...

Accompany these words with actions: pointing up for 'God's'; touching your heart for 'love'; hitting the palm of one hand with the fist of the other for 'stronger than' (or perhaps striking a strong man pose).

For each story the missing word is:

God's love is stronger than *danger*; God's love is stronger than *darkness*; God's love is stronger than *death*.

Footrest

At this point in the programme, take a break for a drink and a biscuit.

Footprints

Now comes an opportunity for groups to explore the stories and theme in up to three activities, depending on the time available. The suggestions for three workshops are drama (Footlights), music (Footnotes) and craft (Fancy Footwork). It may be better, depending on the numbers involved, to do each activity all together and in succession as opposed to working a carousel of activities so that there are not too many in each group. You might decide to leave out one of activities, possibly the music workshop, incorporating its suggestions into other parts of the programme.



Footlights

If you are having three groups, then each one could work on one particular story from the three that are suggested. This could then lead to an opportunity for a short presentation to a wider audience at the end of the event. For each story the pattern for the workshop, however, is the same and begins with some simple drama games to set the scene.

1. Play a game using three key words from the story. The group should be in a circle and you give everyone one of the key words in turn around the circle. You then call out those words and ask them to change places quickly but carefully across the circle. Encourage them to cross the circle interpreting the word by the way they move or the sounds they make. Use words like:
for the storm: sea, sail and storm
for the man delivered from evil: ropes, rocks and run-away pigs
for the Lazarus story: cave, garden and home

2. Use «page:In and out - a dramatic activity=788» as a way to explore the feelings in the stories, for example fear, tiredness, sadness, shock, anger, excitement, boredom, joy, peace.

3. Start the drama off by asking the group to create a «page:freeze-frames=783» of one moment from the story, for example:

- on the boat just as the storm is building up
- among the tombs just as the pigs appear
- in the garden just as the stone is being rolled away from the cave
- The group should decide who is who in the scene, including, of course, the main characters, and then work out what they would be saying and thinking at that point. A leader could come and 'interview' them as if they were on TV.

Next, each person in the frame needs to work out what movements they will be making towards the next step of the story and in what order. What will they be thinking and saying next?

Then decide on how the scene will finish and what everyone will be saying after the miracle that Jesus performs.

Finally, run this all together as a mini-episode or scene from the story.

Footnotes

Here are some songs on the theme of God's love that you could use for this event and practise during the workshop:

Jesus' love is very wonderful

1 2 3 Jesus loves me

I'm so glad that my Father in heaven

Our God is a great big God

God's love is like a circle (the to the tune of 'Puff the Magic Dragon')



There is also a song to the tune of 'Match of the Day' written by Lucy Moore, which involves the group creating some of the words for the song. You need three large objects thought up by the group. These might range from dinosaurs to jumbo jets, and each needs an action to go with it.

God's Love

You know it's bigger than a... (*object 1*)

It's bigger than the sky. (*stretch out arms in arc*)

It's bigger than a... (*object 2*)

It's wide, it's deep, it's high! (*point with both arms in all three directions in turn*)

It's bigger than a... (*object 3*)

It's bigger than the sea. (*make wavy motions with hands*)

And the greatest thing about our God's love (*hold hands out open*)

It's always there for me! (*point to self with both hands*)

If you run a separate music workshop, there may also be time to interpret the stories through sounds. Choose one percussion instrument to be the sound of God's love. Use other instruments to create the atmosphere of danger, darkness and death from the stories. Then the instrument that signifies love should begin sounding to challenge and eventually silence all the other sounds.

Fancy footwork

1. Collect together a variety of coloured beads and some string to create friendship bracelets. Let each child decide on one larger coloured bead that will represent God's love, which they should string into the middle of the bracelet.
2. Create a heart-shaped Valentine's card and then divide the heart into three sections, using two lines. In each section the children could draw pictures from the stories they have heard. Add lettering around the heart, which reads 'God's love is greater than...' Inside the heart there could also be some words from the Bible about love. One suggestion is: 'To me, you are very dear, and I love you' (Isaiah 43:4, CEV). This could be a message between the words 'Dear (name of the child)' and 'Love God' with a cross for the kiss.
3. Craft shops sell sets of small gold, red or plain heart-shaped boxes. Give one to each child to decorate in different ways with coloured pens, stickers or other craft pieces to make their own special box in which they could keep a small cross to remind them of God's love for them.

Foothold

As part of your special event make space for some quieter reflection and worship together. Gather the group in a large semicircle so everyone can see a story presentation. The following story is a visual presentation of some verses from Ephesians 1 about God's amazing love for each one of us. It



is a reflective story in the style of Godly Play written by Lucy Moore, which can be found on our website: «page:Ephesians 1 - being a child of God=1892».

Footsteps to the Feast

Use the Footsteps Chant from this event to walk everyone into a circle for a finale to the programme. Once in that circle, everyone should join hands. Now, with help from leaders, reshape the circle into the following different shapes without letting go of hands:

a heart shape, an equal-armed cross, a figure of eight, a kiss.

Each of the shapes is a reminder of God's love, which has been explored in this outline. Finally, return to the circle, which itself is a sign of God's unending love, and then pass the squeeze of God's love around, which theoretically could also go on forever!

Stepping out to the Feast

End your special event with a feast of Valentine-linked food such as: heart-shaped biscuits/cake, love heart sweets, chocolates, sandwiches cut into circles, fruit cut up into the shapes of letters that spell love and so on.