

Love Came Down at Christmas

Love came down at Christmas,
 Love all lovely, Love Divine,
 Love was born at Christmas,
 Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
 Love Incarnate, Love Divine,
 Worship we our Jesus,
 But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,
 Love be yours and love be mine,
 Love to God and all men,
 Love for plea and gift and sign.

This poem is by the 19th century English poet, Christina Rossetti. It was first published in 1885. Its simple structure is an invitation for us to enter the Christmas story. As we have gathered on this Christmas Eve I would like to use this poem to reflect on the meaning of this night, which is all about how:

“Love came down at Christmas”.

So let’s take the poem one stanza at a time.

*Love came down at Christmas,
 Love all lovely, Love Divine,*

As we ponder the story of Christmas and love’s arrival we think back to another poet, Isaiah. In the first reading for this Mass he sings about how “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, on them light has shone”. Then in our reading from Titus, St Paul picks up on this same theme when he declares that “the grace of God appeared”. This then reaches its climax in the Gospel where in the days of the great Caesar Augustus.... something happens in Nazareth and Bethlehem. The sign that almost everyone misses. This baby is born. And as is true with a baby’s birth “love all lovely” enters into the world. How we are excited when we hear of the birth of a baby, pictures are admired, videos oohed and awed over.

This tells us something about love, for as Rossetti goes on to say:

**Love was born at Christmas,
 Star and Angels gave the sign.**

Signs of God’s love are evident all around us as this evening’s psalm celebrated.

“Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar and all that fills it, let the field exult and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy”.

The created world has a way of celebrating God’s glory and majesty, and even stars and angels which raise our eyes heavenward in awe and wonder in the story of Christmas direct our gaze earthward to that place where:

“she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was not room for them in the inn”.

It’s not in the majesty of the created world, wonderful though it may be that we find the full expression of this love.... rather it is in the birth of Jesus - the one Isaiah declared is:

“Wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

When we come to the realization that in Jesus Christ is the full expression of the Love that comes down at Christmas then we can give our “Yes, I see” to the next stanza in the poem.

***Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?***

The Godhead is of course the blessed Trinity – but what is worth pondering is we only know of the wonderful communion of the Blessed Three because Love Incarnate is also Love Divine. As love comes down at Christmas it is as we worship the child in the manger that we can then realize something about the Love of God. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in a perfect community of love. And it is our destiny to one day be fully embraced in the heaven’s complete and perfect love where in the words of Isaiah there will be:

“endless peace, in a kingdom of perfect justice and righteousness”.

All will be ordered by love, for love and centred in love.

But here below we need to remember the question:

“But wherewith for sacred sign”?

Wherewith is a word we don’t use anymore. A more apt turn of phrase “is he the means by which the sacred sign of love is displayed? The answer is “yes” Jesus is the sacred sign. And what is the means by which the sign of his love continues to be expressed today?

Here we want to ponder the swaddling clothes and the manger. First, swaddling clothes point forward to his shroud that his body would be wrapped in after the crucifixion. If you know ancient practices or if you are familiar with this, when they would wrap a baby in swaddling clothes, they would wrap it in bands of cloth very tightly to keep the body together, so it almost looks like a little shroud for the baby. So the swaddling clothes point forward to the passion, death and burial of Jesus. But the manger is also a prefiguration of the fact that in dying, Jesus

would become food for the whole world. So it's a prefiguration of the Eucharist, that Christ, the babe in Bethlehem, is food for the whole world. The name Bethlehem, means house of bread. "Beth" means house and "lehem" means bread. So Jesus, the bread of life, is born in the house of bread and laid in a manger to be bread for the life of the world.

This is a powerful and beautiful image to take with you from this Mass. For here we celebrate the one who not only became a little child, but who comes to us in a little host as bread for the whole world.

The first two stanzas of Rossetti's Christmas poem concentrate on Jesus. The third stanza is our response.

*Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.*

Notice how this stanza begins and ends; token and sign are synonymous. The way we love in response to the love that comes down at Christmas will be our taking this Christmas love from here so as to change and transform us. We will love in such a way that its expression towards God and all people will first of all be a plea. That is a call, a cry in a world where there is so much darkness our lives will radiate that light of his love, desiring for others to move from the shadows of confusion and despair into the circle of his effusive light. This love is also to be a gift so that we who are being graced by the love that came down at Christmas are a gift to others. Listen to how St Paul describes this in Titus:

"Jesus is purifying a people for himself who are zealous for good deeds."

We want to extend the gift of Jesus to others because we are discovering the sign of his transformative love. Again listen to the Apostle Paul:

The Grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly.

Rossetti's poem is an invitation to pay ever greater attention to the Bethlehem Love Story. It has a way of getting into our hearts and then expressed in our bodies so we can be tokens of his love until signs give way to full sight when in the words of today's psalm we will

"Sing to the Lord a new song, where we will tell of his salvation from day to day.

Until we fully join heaven's chorus may we sing this song together.

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