

## CHRISTMAS SERMON: LOVE CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMAS

Paul W. Newman

### Text: John 1: 1-5

Love came down at Christmas---but, of course, it was here all the time. We cannot imagine a world without love. This is what the Prologue to John's Gospel says. If we change one word in the first chapter of John we get the picture.

In the beginning was love, and love was with God, and love was God. All things came into being through love and without love not one thing came into being. What has come into being in love was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. And love was embodied and lived among us, and we have seen that one's glory, glory as of God's own offspring, full of grace and truth.

There is a country and western song that starts off "Just what is it about love that you don't understand?". The implication is that you must be pretty stupid if you don't know what love means. Just what is it about  $1+1=2$  that you don't understand?

Well, I'm sorry but love ain't that simple. We are told that the Greek language has 21 words for love—each one signifying a different kind of love or different connotation of one kind of love or another. That doesn't help us a whole lot, unless our mother tongue is Greek. We have to do it in English and in English we use the word love to signify a lot of different kinds of love. There are other words, if you think about it—words like charity, as in "faith, hope and charity"—but the meaning of charity has changed since the King James' Version was written in Elizabethan English. It doesn't quite do it to say, "Charity came down at Christmas". Another word for love is passion—meaning sexual drive. *Libido* is the Greek word. But that doesn't work very well for Christmas either

How about friendship? That is another kind of love. The Greek word was *philia*, As in Philadelphia, the city of friendly love. No, love came down at Christmas means something a bit different than friendly love. What about family love, love for parents siblings and relatives—a most important kind of love in most peoples' lives? But it doesn't quite fill the bill either as the explanation for love came down at Christmas, although it is getting a bit warmer. The love of Christmas is something like family love.

There is another word that fills the bill even better to signify the meaning of the love that came down at Christmas. The word is in the lesson we read today: "We have seen his glory—full of grace and truth." Grace is the word. As we ponder the meaning of grace we may see what the love was like that was and is the gift of God at Christmas and ever since the beginning of the world.

Grace is a special kind of love that can save every other kind of love. To save means to make it healthy. The word salvation comes from the word *salvus* that means health.

Grace is the kind of love that makes charity healthy, passion healthy, friendship healthy, family relations healthy and all other kinds of love healthy. It is the down- to- earth all purpose remedy for what can and does go wrong in the different kinds of love that surge around in everyone's life.

To get a small glimpse of what the gift of grace means we need to take one specific example of one kind of love and follow it through to see how it works --what can go wrong with it and how grace can save it and make it healthy. It is tempting to take sexual passion as the example but it may be wiser to take another example under the circumstances of this Christmas service.

The Greeks had a word for a kind of love that absolutely everyone has. The word was *Eros*, and the English word we might use for this kind of love is aspiration. When we aspire for something we have a kind of love for it. Aspiration is love for whatever we consider to be good, better or best. If love in general is the power that tries to unite whatever is separated—bodies, friends, family members or rich and poor—then aspiration is the kind of love that tries to unite us with the ideals we cherish. Aspiration pulls or pushes us in the direction of what we desire to be or to have. It is the power of wanna be. What do you wanna be? Do you wanna be rich? You wanna be healthy? You wanna be beautiful? You wanna be good? You wanna be number one? You wanna be skillful? You wanna be a doctor? You wanna be a lawyer? You wanna be loved? You wanna be a saint? You wanna be humble, rational, fair, compassionate, wise. You wanna be a good parent, a worthy son or daughter? You wanna be OK? You wanna be a decent human being? You wanna be a Christian in your heart—as the old gospel song puts it?

There is no end of wanna be. Aspiration makes the world go around. Just as passion makes the earth move, charity makes it a kinder and gentler place, friendship makes it fun and family love makes it all worthwhile. Aspiration – like the other kinds of love is not a bad thing. It is not a bad thing to wanna be good, better or best—whether it is sports, arts, finance, or religion or just plain living. But aspiration can also be unhealthy and cause life to be unhappy, unjust, or downright evil.

The power or energy or drive of aspiration can first of all create anxiety. You can wanna be so badly that it makes you sick. It gives you headaches; it gnaws at your stomach; it robs you of peace of mind; it is a bee in your bonnet, a burr under your saddle; it can be an obsession; you can be “driven” as they say. Aspiration can cause you extreme anxiety. You can be consumed by the fear of failure, ending up as a “wanna be, a failure a loser. Guilt, the psychologists tell us, is basically the experience of failure to achieve what one wants to achieve. And guilt can turn to hatred; it typically seeks a scapegoat to carry the blame. Failure with its guilt leads to anger—blaming others and, at worst, violence. If you come home from work and kick the cat or someone else in your household it is likely because your aspirations have not been achieved, causing you anxiety, guilt for the failure and unhealthy destructive behaviour.

Grace is the remedy for anxious aspirations and the guilt they create. Grace—the love that came down at Christmas is the power that can make aspirations healthy and keep them from being destructive forces in human living.

How does that work? What does the love that came down at Christmas have to do with wanna bes? A real life story might be a way to see what Christmas love's got to do with it.

There was a young man who was raised in a church-going family, who in due course decided to be a minister and gained entrance to a theological college. He graduated after three years and had aspirations for more education so he went to graduate school. He soon realized that graduate studies could be a very stressful business. There was a real risk of failure. There were lots of examples of failure in other graduate students in the college. There were signs of stress in other students. One student had so much stress that he had to anaesthetize his forehead every day in order to reduce his headaches so that he could work on his thesis. The studies were a big financial risk. Nobody likes to go into debt and fail. Time could run out and one would have to go back to one's family and friends as a failure, a foolish wanna be who didn't have the right stuff to make it. This student felt that his reputation was on the line, his dignity as a person, even his worth as a human being was in question.

Somehow into this situation came the power of grace and it transformed the aspirations of this student. The student was given the gift of assurance that God, not the college, nor his family, nor his friends, nor the other students nor anyone else was the judge of his and anyone else's worth. God alone was the one who measured people for failure or success in the final analysis. God alone could guarantee whether a person was OK or not. God alone could determine whether a person has true dignity or worth as a human being. God's forgiveness, God's grace, is sufficient for the living of any situation. And because of the one in whom God's love was embodied, because of the life and words of Jesus of Nazareth, this particular student believed that he was loved and accepted regardless of the outcome of his graduate studies. The anxiety and fear of failure were overcome and replaced by healthy aspiration—a desire to learn was liberated from stress and became a labour of love.

For freedom, St Paul says, Christ has set us free. The whole world St Paul says again is waiting for the glorious liberty of the children of God. The gift of God's love embodied in Jesus and spread around by the Spirit of God is what liberates people. It turns their kinds of love into blessings instead of problems. Grace lets people make love without harming each other; it lets people give charity with genuine kindness; it lets people be friends without co-dependency or jealousy; it lets people in families love each other without controlling each other. Amazing grace---the gift of Christmas that has always and everywhere been at work but that we have seen embodied in a young carpenter turned prophet, a spokesperson for God the Creator, a Spirit-filled teacher and leader of willing followers, a lover of even his enemies, a companion of any who would let him live in their minds and hearts in every age. We celebrate the coming of that One because he represents the health, the salvation in other words, that the Creator wishes for us and for

every human being in all our many loves, our passions, our friendships, our families, our aspirations and our prayers. Thanks be to God for the wonderful gift of love that came down at Christmas.