

Day 25: Love Came Down at Christmas

Dec. 22

*1 Love came down at Christmas,
love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas;
star and angels gave the sign.*

*2 Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, Love divine;
worship we our Jesus,
but wherewith for sacred sign?*

*3 Love shall be our token;
love be yours and love be mine;
love to God and others,
love for plea and gift and sign.*

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Love Came Down at Christmas is the work of Christina Rossetti, a prolific poet and devoted Christian, who also wrote *In the Bleak Midwinter*. (See Day 18 for more biographical info on her.) Rossetti was a poet rather than a lyricist. She did not particularly intend her poetry to be sung, and indeed did not live to see it used this way. However, the sentiment expressed in her work makes for good singing. The tune commonly used for *Love Came Down at Christmas* is an old Irish melody, joined with the words some years after her death.

This hymn, as the name states outright, is about love. But what kind of love? We say, “I love chocolate ... I love pretty girls (or manly men) ... I love my country ...” The English term “love” can mean a number of different things – from a strong preference to sentimental feelings to raging hormones. But love in Rossetti’s poem is about none of these. Instead, she uses the Biblical sense of an act of the will. This love *chooses* to give in order to bring good to the beloved, whether warm feelings are attached or not. In its highest form: “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

The first verse starts: “Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, Love divine,” meaning that God himself, who is love (1 John 4:8), was born into the world. Verse 2 makes explicit the true identity of Jesus as part of the “Godhead” whom we “worship.” But he is not only God Almighty, he is “our Jesus.” We know and worship him personally, not just as some abstract notion.

And because he is “our Jesus,” certain behaviors are called forth from within us in verse 3. “Love shall be our token,” that is, love shall be emblematic of us.

But who are we to love? It is “love to God and others,” which Jesus identified as the two great commandments. In fact, in John 13:34-35 he called all disciples to unselfish giving for the good of the beloved – whether we feel like it or not. The hymn ends by telling us the reasons for all this: “love for plea and gift and sign.” Love is our *plea* (what we seek), our *gift* to God and all others, and our *sign* that we are in fact Jesus’ disciples.

This hymn, which might at first glance seem to be a slightly embarrassing sentimental outpouring, turns out to be filled with deep theological substance that becomes an encouragement to believers: love as we have been loved by our amazing God ... by “our Jesus.”

Questions

1. When did you first encounter Jesus as a person to know and worship rather than as an abstraction or just an historical figure?
2. Who do you have the hardest time loving, and why?
3. What are a couple of positive things you can do today to demonstrate to a hard-to-love one the kind of love that Jesus came to bestow on us all at Christmas?

Prayer

Jesus, your love amazes me. While I was still caught up in my rebellion and sin, you loved me. Indeed, you loved me before I was even born, and you’ve continued to embrace me through my worst days. I acknowledge that you are my Lord and my God, and I want to follow you. Help me this day to pour out the love you would overflow from me onto all those with whom I come in contact as a sign that I am yours and you are my Jesus. Amen.