



United in the Love of Christ

Colossians 1:24-2:5

It is a simple thing to gather around a Christmas tree. It is simple to hold hands to sing a Christmas carol. It is something of meager importance for us to spend some time together attending a special presentation by our children at the end of the year at a school or in church. It is a little thing to throw a party at which we give each other gifts and enjoy special foods of the season. It may be no more than one more obligation for us to show up to a Christmas celebration among the company employees. It is quite another thing to live truly united in a love that is real. Is it possible that the love of Christ, expressed in his birth some 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, can unite in a way that makes a difference to our way of living?

This is the season when we think of Jesus' birth and the celebrations surrounding it. We think of trees, decorations, snow, presents, Santa Claus, reindeer, and even a child in the manger of Bethlehem, but we reflect very little more deeply than that. It is well possible that we return to recount the story of the first Christmas. It is likewise possible that our reflection is limited to repeating those events with no further thought about them. We should think about the fact that on that first Christmas God came to be among us. Jesus came with the full understanding that he was come to die as a result of our violent response to his offering of love and grace. Yes, we recognize the scene of love in our portraits of Bethlehem, but keep them isolated from the cost to God that such an arrival was. Already in the manger of Bethlehem God's love was walking toward a cross with all its cruel rejection, violence, and pain. Fully aware of what was to come, God was born in a demonstration of his great love. He offered himself for us. He entrusted himself to our care.

Christmas is a magnificent portrait of love. We see there in the manger of Bethlehem a newborn baby, like so many others who call us to care for and treat them with affection due to their helplessness. We heed their cries and we gather to watch their smiles and zest for life with all its newness. Perhaps we pause to reflect on the reason for God to empty himself of position and privilege in order to live among people like us. We are left to imagine how one can put aside so much comfort and power to be present with people like ourselves.

Jesus came amid the daily life of an humble, dirty, and ignorant people—a people who in a few short years would be ready to throw him to his death, nailing him to a cross. Into the context of a people who so reject him, Jesus came, born amid the filth of a manger, in the humility of a stable and in a context marked by poverty and violence. As John says, he came to his own, and his own rejected him. Even so, he came to offer God's great love for each one of us.

Paul took a long time to recognize the God's love in Jesus Christ. Before accepting Christ, he was one of the violent ones hurling insults and stones at believers who had heeded God's proposal of grace and love. He had to leave behind what had been so important to his daily life and religious tradition. He left it for having found something superior in the gospel of Jesus—the grace and love of God that so exceeded the legalistic traditions of his prior conduct and manner. It was no longer his efforts on which he depended, but on the initiatives of God.

His new life was very different from the old one. In that other one he lived according to his own purposes and sense of progress in life. Though he defined them as a service to God, he made decisions

that stemmed from his own counsel and followed the rules of his traditions. According to such actions, he expected to raise his importance before his countrymen and win the blessing of God as a result of his initiatives. Living by the gospel, meanwhile, he followed a different purpose—he sought the best for others at a high personal cost. It was now the love of Christ with its character of sacrifice that led and directed his steps. In the midst of his suffering, he did not see so much the pain as the opportunity to serve the best interests of the Gentiles—to take the love of Christ and the grace of God to all peoples of the world.

This was the original reason for Christmas. This was the manner of action that Paul had learned from the life and character of Jesus Christ. It was the purpose that led to the first Christmas—a purpose that had existed from before the creation of the world. It was at Christmas that it began to be revealed, or rather that this revelation became visible to us, even if people still do not appreciate it. There was the love of God with an offer of grace, forgiveness, and peace. The revelation was wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger that smelled of the beasts all around. The incarnation of divine love would live a life of suffering, and accepted it because of the same love that brought it to birth in our midst—the same love that led him toward the cross to die in offering us reconciliation with God.

Paul said he had been sent by God's will to work for the good of the church as a whole. It had been a long time that salvation by grace had been the divine plan, but it was in Christ that this message became clear. It had always God's plan, because of his eternal love for us. This plan included both the suffering of Christ Jesus, as well as that of servants like Paul who accepted suffering in the defense and expansion of the gospel—also because of God's love. It was this divine love that impelled God to sending Jesus Christ. It was also this love that is the reason behind our growth and discipleship—it is the goal of our journey of faith.

As Paul said, it is in the love of God revealed in Christ that we have reason to unite under his mission of reconciling the world to God. Divine love has already opened all the doors for us to arrive before the Lord and Creator of the world. The barriers between us and God have all been broken down—all barriers except one. The barrier lacking is that of our acceptance.

As at the first Christmas the question arose of how one would receive the baby Jesus, it is the same today. To us as well there are options regarding what we will do with Jesus. Paul for years had rejected him like the crowds did under the instigation of the priests and religious leaders before Pontius Pilate. He had persecuted the church in his youth. Now with the call of Christ, he recognized that the love of God through his grace revealed in Christ was sufficient not only to cover his failures, but also to encourage him and give him purpose beyond the suffering he received from those who acted as he himself had done before. It was now a source of joy to suffer on behalf of others, since it was for the love revealed in Christ that he was joined to higher purposes than those of his past.

He fought for Christians to be united in the love of Christ—that they might continue relying fully on the love of God revealed by Christ at his birth, as well as in the painful death he suffered. Many of our Christmas songs speak of serenity that did not exist in that night of so long ago. It was a common night, full of its anguish, pains, and the lack of an appropriate room for a birth. Even so, it was a night of peace, because in the midst of those suffering lives, the love of God became flesh, calling us all to live together in His grace and love.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*