

# Love at Christmas time...

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Richard Dawson

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Romans 5<sup>6-11</sup>/ John 15<sup>9-17</sup>/ Matt 5<sup>43-48</sup>

Thomas A Kempis was a late Medieval Catholic monk and probable author of *The Imitation of Christ*, one of the best known Christian books on devotion. He was born at the Lower Rhine region in Kempen (Germany), County of Cleves in 1380 and died in 1471 near Zwolle. Amongst much else Thomas wrote this about love...

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin or your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable...The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is... Hell.”

The last of the candles of Advent celebrates love – God’s wonderful love for humankind and the love that should work and live within our hearts. I wonder what makes you feel loved? Is there something you can definitely say feels like love to you? Perhaps it’s receiving a present or gift of some sort. Perhaps it’s quiet words of encouragement and appreciation? Perhaps it is the gift of time spent together talking and sharing with another. Perhaps it is touch – being touched, being hugged, being held. One thing is clear – experiencing love, feeling loved is one of the most important experiences of life. To sense that you are loved is to feel, in many ways, complete. It helps us to know that we are worthy as a person and that we have some ultimate value. It helps us face the negative messages we encounter everyday. Messages about our performance, our looks, our future and our general worth. One person’s love expressed in a way we can experience as love is enough to counter all of those negative influences if we are at all healthy.

Of course unhealthy people are sometimes unable to receive that love. No matter who loves them or how they are loved they have wounds that prevent them either receiving the love or appreciating it. But in the main people respond amazingly to love.

So the question arises, what does it mean to love? What does love look like; can we distil some basic principles of love that will give us a sense of where to start in our loving of others? I think there are and I think the Christmas story gives us a wonderful set of clues as to what these principles are. So I’m going to work through just three of the main themes of the Christmas story and try to unpack some of these principles today. The three are these:

1.) Love is unilateral – that is it is given not so much in response to another but by virtue of the decision of one person. Love that is earned – is not love.

2.) Love is sacrificial. To truly love means to give something away – it sacrifices for the other willingly even painfully and certainly without expecting a return.

3.) Love does not rule over another. It does not use power to achieve its ends. It sees equality as a form of its own life.

Let's do something different this morning. Let's begin with the last one first. Love seeks equality or equal standing. Equality has had some bad press over the last 20 or 30 years. It's a notion which is difficult to tie down at the best of times. Feminism has sought equality for a long time accusing patriarchal forces in society of enforcing inequality in all sorts of ways. And in many ways women who say this are right. Women should have had the right to vote, they should get equal pay for equal work, they shouldn't have to fight to have their brains and their abilities recognised. But, as is often pointed out, equal doesn't mean the same. That men and women bring different things to any table is the case and so long as we don't make one out to be superior to the other we will always benefit from such difference.

At Christmas and in the Christmas story we witness perhaps the most far-reaching attempt to bring what is radically different into equality with we humans. God who dwells in unutterable glory and whose Presence is so different and superior to ours that we could not exist if exposed to it – becomes a baby. God reduces Himself to our level. He becomes what we are in order that He might reveal His love to us completely.

How does this enable God to love us? It does so by enabling us to see and experience love in a way that is accessible to us. It brings love near, it makes love available, it makes love public. Perhaps one of the first things married people need to learn is that no matter who it is they've married there will be things they have to learn about how the other experiences love. For some people a present means nothing. It doesn't feel like love. For others, a present is the best expression of love they could ever have. At Christmas we see God choosing to love us by becoming human and hence by becoming radically equal with us. This should inform us daily in regard to how we treat others. We cannot love another by remaining aloof. We must always find some way to 'become like them,' to identify with them, to help them see that we are no different from them. This is where love starts because this allows the lover to speak the language of the beloved.

Secondly, love is sacrificial – it is committed to giving, indeed, to giving **away!** A generosity of spirit is of the highest of spiritual values. When Jesus reminded us of the danger of material things ...

<sup>24</sup>“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (Matt 6)

He was really hitting out at a deeply spiritual side effect which was to forego the ability to give both to God and to others. When we love mammon or money we begin to speak its language

and this is the language of greed which requires a kind of heartlessness which cannot love. Paul reminds us of this in Timothy when he says...

<sup>10</sup>For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. (1 Tim 6)

What we see at Christmas is the beginning of an incredible life of sacrifice which ended with the ultimate sacrifice upon a Cross. All of God's love is lived out in this life of sacrifice and all of that sacrifice speaks love for all eternity to every person who ever lived. We cannot love without sacrifice and this is one reason why marriage is in such a poor state in this country. We do not learn early to sacrifice for others. Rather we grow up learning how to consume and how to accumulate and how to be selfish. An earlier age simply by virtue of its poverty knew something of what it meant to give so that all might benefit. We in our wealth have lost not only this small art but also the much greater skill of loving those who mean a lot to us. And we have lost this skill because we have forgotten how to sacrifice, how to give away things.

Finally we note that love at Christmas was **unilateral**. This word simply means that something stems from one direction and not from two. God's love at Christmas comes in the form of a small human who is like us (is equal) and who is given away freely to us (is sacrificial) and is not contingent upon anything we humans have done or can do. Indeed, Jesus comes to the Jews after hundreds of years of apostasy and unfaithfulness. Jesus comes despite that not because of it. Jesus doesn't come as a reward or because we have done anything to deserve His coming. He comes **unilaterally – because God decides to love us**.

I wonder if you've experienced love in this way. I wonder if you know what it's like to be loved unilaterally – simply because someone has decided to love you? Most of us probably should answer yes to this. Our parents, our wives or husbands, even our friends usually love in something of this fashion. But it's a tangled web we humans live. So often if we can't get the love we need we try to earn it and many will give what passes for love if we perform in certain ways. And then life becomes tricky because once an agreement like this has been reached both people involved are acting not so much out of love but out of some other motive. Whatever that may be, love is not the result. Love is not given and love is not received.

God is not like this. God loves us because He has decided to. We have not and cannot earn God's love. It is given freely. The question is, are we willing to trust in this love of God's or will our long habit of expecting to have to give something in return prevent us from doing this. Many people give up on God's love because they encounter problems or difficulties in life along the way. The reasoning is usually something like this – 'I trusted God's love but lost my job. God should've prevented that if He loved me so I no longer trust God.' or 'I trusted God's love but lost my marriage. God should've prevented my wife leaving me so I no longer trust God.' Notice, however, what is assumed in this sort of reasoning. It is that our being loved will require of God certain things – that love will mean this, that and the next thing. That we will not receive this love **unless** it means this, that and the next thing. Already we have made of love a **contract** where we are demanding certain things of the one who is loving us if we are to receive that

love. Love, however, that becomes a contract is not love. It is neither given freely nor is it received freely. It has become a commercial exercise; it has become mammon!

At Christmas time God announces that He chooses to love us freely. I urge you friends to receive this love as it is given and to begin to grow in it daily as we enter together a new year. God's love at Christmas seeks equality, is sacrificial and is given before it has been deserved.