**Christmas Day: Love like no other**

*Now to the Lord sing praises,
All you within this place,
And with true love and brotherhood
Each other now embrace.
This holy tide of Christmas
All others doth efface.
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy!*

**(‘God rest you merry, gentlemen’ from *Christmas Collection*, no.33)**

**Scripture:**

* John 1:14 ‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.’
* John 15:9-12 ‘As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.’

**Introduction**

* In his account of the birth of Christ, John focuses on the meaning of the event, not the actual circumstances. The standout word as he unpacks the meaning of the story in the remarkable prologue to his Gospel is ‘with’. God *with* us marks a significant moment in God’s redemption plan and it would be impossible to underestimate the importance of the moment.
* In his book *A Nazareth Manifesto*, Sam Wells describes the significance of God’s desire to be with us:

‘God’s fundamental purpose is to be with us – not primarily to rescue us, or even empower us, but simply to be with us, to share our existence, to enjoy our hopes and fears, our delights and griefs, our triumphs and disasters.’

* In his ministry Jesus did not only teach but also lived out God’s love in an extravagant and sacrificial way. He knew that all who followed him would receive much joy (John 15:9-12) and fullness of life (John 10:10). His life’s mission was to confront the systems, structures and barriers that stood in the way of men, women, children, and all of creation, experiencing this. He calls us to do the same.

**Context**

* Responding to the summary of all the commands that Jesus

gave in John 15, loving God and loving others quite rightly underpins, inspires and motivates everything that The Salvation Army does. The values statement on The Salvation Army’s UK website makes this clear: ‘Our identity, vision and God-given mission as disciples of Jesus Christ are shaped by the

* values of the Kingdom of God as we love God and love others, reaching for fullness of life for all with Jesus.’
* Now, declares the text, God is with us! (‘Emmanuel’ – Matthew 1:23). The Bible is full of references to God ‘dwelling’ with us. For example, in Exodus 25:8 – ‘Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them’, and many times in the New Testament.
* The birth of Jesus marks the moment when God came to be with us, so that we can be with him. His presence in the manger reflects a love that descends. This ‘coming down’ marks a new understanding of God’s love and how it relates to humankind. It marks a contrast to the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) where God’s people ‘go up’ to Jerusalem to worship him. Also, the ascending of holy mountains to receive the Ten Commandments or to meet with and encounter God is well marked out in Old Testament history. God ‘coming down’ as a vulnerable baby, to be with us, was a total surprise to the Jewish community, as they expected the Messiah to arrive on earth in triumph. It was one that they could not comprehend or accept.
* This week’s quoted verse of ‘God rest ye merry, gentlemen’ speaks of ‘with true love and brotherhood each other now embrace’, the implication being that the love of God would form a new, never-seen-before type of human community – the Church. To love each other as Christ loved us (John 15:12) is a command that we should constantly reflect on – loving God and loving others, says Jesus, is vital.

**Reflection – looking inwards**

* The realisation that God’s highest ambition is to be *with* us is overwhelming. We can more easily accept that God is *for* us, as in being on our side. In the Old Testament God was very much *for* his people, whilst frequently promising that the time would come when he would live (dwell) *with* them. The ‘with us’ proximity of God in the person of the Christ-child is no less overwhelming. However, this was merely the beginning.
* The ‘with us’ Jesus would soon become, through the Holy Spirit, ‘God in us’: the life of Christ formed in me. We often pray with confidence, ‘To be like Jesus! This hope possesses me, his Spirit helping me, like him I’ll be’ (‘To be like Jesus’, *SASB* 328).
* Corporate worship creates the opportunity to tell God that we love him. Personal prayer can create the opportunity for God to tell us that he loves us.
* ‘He came right down to me … to condescend to be my friend’,

the chorus of a song written by General Albert Osborn (*SASB* 157),

describes the mystery of the incarnation. This requires deep

reflection which may help us to begin to understand the

gracious nature of God’s love. You may ask ‘Why does God love?’ ‘God does not love us because we are good. God loves us because God is good’ (Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love*).

**Reflection – looking outwards**

* To be ‘with’ God is to be ‘with’ each other – this is the heart of the gospel of Christ. A church should be the most loving community of people on the planet. This community knows how to handle human frailty, feebleness and failure. God’s love blossoms in the imperfect world of human relationships, showing its true colours in humility: we forgive as we have been forgiven. We are learning how to live together both on the mountaintops and in the dark valleys.
* This ‘love one another’ community will be characterised by the selfless love of God evidenced in the Christ-child. Acceptance, forgiveness, tolerance, grace, hospitality to strangers and welcome are just some of beautiful evidences that would define such a community.

**Prayer**

**‘Joyful, joyful we adore thee’, SASB 39 verse 3 *(emphasis on final four lines)***

‘Thou art giving and forgiving,

Ever blessing, ever blessed,

Wellspring of the joy of living,

Ocean-depth of happy rest.

Thou our Father, Christ our brother –

All who live in love are thine;

Teach us how to love each other,

Lift us to the joy divine.’

Lord Jesus Christ, be with us and teach us how to love each other as you love us. We make this prayer in Jesus’ name. Amen.