**THE LOVE STORY OF CHRIST**

The Collect

O God, who before the passion of your only begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen (Let it be so)

It is not easy for us to think in these terms, we live in a culture that is repelled by the idea of holy unquestioned authority. And if one of our leaders arrogates to himself semi-regal authority, we are immediately on guard. Our democracy rests upon the principle of equality. Our leaders are not glorious kings that inspire trust and affection. No matter how able, leaders most often have ‘feet of clay.’ We are not inclined to revere anyone. In earlier times this was not the case.

Medieval people were encouraged to see their kings and Bishops as models on earth of what God was like in the heavenly sphere. We have no such illusions. Add to all this, we ourselves are fallen from grace. Our original parents sinned, and we continue to do so. In some ways we remain children and a challenge to God. As Christians we believe that the Lord is always present, but we do not see him. We pray to Him and sometimes experience joy in his presence. Few of us are able to spend hours at prayer. We are thus, even redeemed, hard ground for our Lord’s plow.

Yet we are our Father’s children; we were created in the image of a perfect King and impowered to be fruitful, sharing in his work. We do well to remember that we are who He says we are, nothing less. This world can damage us with fear, anxiety, and darkness. If we let them, outside events can literally make us sick. Commitment to Jesus though worship, prayer and Bible study constructs neural pathways in our brains that keep us in the light of God. Our creator has always sought us out.

Consider the pressures of your own relationships: family, friendships, professional and community responsibilities. Now multiply that by the billions of God’s creatures that he has sought to restore to himself. God’s quest to restore His creation began after the fall of Adam and Eve using the natural law of conscience and the glory of creation to attract men and women to Him. This failed.

We read in Exodus that God offered mankind an opportunity for salvation through the giving of the Ten Commandments and subsequently the comprehensive Divine Law. His chosen vessel Moses was even given a special radiance so that the people of Israel might know that he had not only been fasting and carving tablets on Mt. Sinai. He had been schooled in the presence of the *Most High God*. Yahweh had wanted to bring man back to Himself after the fall. Man did not come back to God out of fear nor out of a desire for salvation through the knowledge and practice of the Law. So, the next appeal of the Father was love.

St. Bernard, 12th century Rector of the Cathedral School at Chartres

 and Abbot of Clairvaux, has been called the Billy Graham of the First Crusade [1095-1099]. He introduced in his book the Steps of Humilitya “Love-Story theory of Christ.” God’s reason for incarnating himself in Christ, according to Bernard, was that He wanted men and women to choose to love Him freely. Conscience, fear or a desire for salvation were not compelling or attractive enough, so God’s appeal shifted to unconditional love. God became man in order to get mankind to love him by letting them see God’s love incarnate. Bernard went on to say that in Christ God became flesh so that he could attract man (who being flesh can love only flesh) by letting us contemplate the life and death of Christ. Everything that Jesus said or did was designed to woo his creatures, through faith, back into the loving affection of the Creator.

We must never, never forget that Jesus was fully human. He loved unconditionally and even wept at the tomb of Lazarus and during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (that we celebrate as Palm Sunday). He loved the Jews, knowing that most of those who cheered him during his triumphal entry would a week later be screaming “crucify him.” In this way, through loving self-sacrifice, the Lord prevailed. The bible tells us that the Creator and the angels of heaven rejoice when God’s children listen and turn to Him. Today 2.2 billion men and women in the world profess the faith of Christ. God alone knows how many souls are members of the great Invisible Church that St. Augustine spoke of in the 5th century, brothers and sisters in the New Jerusalem. This will take place because of the life of our Lord Jesus.

In the scriptures of the Epiphany Season, we have been reminded of so many of the ways that Jesus was revealed as Lord. Angels appeared to Shepards at his birth. Magi from Persia worshiped him in his childhood and brought him gifts. Through fasting and prayer, he defeated Satan in the Wilderness. The Gospels recount that when Jesus walked the earth His Fathers own voice singled Him out on two occasions, at his Baptism and later on at the Mount of Transfiguration; where he scolded Peter saying: **This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!** (Luke 9:35) Our Heavenly Father did everything possible to help us understand who Jesus is and that He alone brings salvation.

This was God’s message to Peter, James and John who wanted to give equal regard to Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Being 2000 years from the events of Christ ministry, our culture pushes God to the perimeter of life and exalts the material. Build your education, your profession, your portfolio and then revel in the acquisition of the things that your hard efforts *deserve. “You are worth it*,” declare so many advertisements that it is now commonplace. Years ago, a friend of ours, upon seeing new forest green leather sofas in our living room, told me I was worth it. Good manners prevented a rejoinder, but I know how great a sinner I am. Every blessing, every good thing my wife and I possess is a gift. St. Paul understood this like few of us ever will. He taught that the Purist response to such gifts was love.

The love response we make to Jesus is most often through the vehicle of unique spiritual gifts and talents that we possess from His hand. These are partially enumerated in the last lines of I Corinthians chapter 12. Whether we have the gift of apostolic leadership, or preaching, teaching, or healing, our gifts are not private possessions but conduits of grace. Salvation brings us back into the ‘state of grace’ that human beings lost through sinning. Spiritual gifts and the uses of our talents enable us to show our thankfulness through service to God and the body of Christ. Paul challenges the Christians of Corinth and us by extension to remember that love makes our actions and gifts affective. Moreover, since God’s love is limitless, in Christ there is no limit to the love we might express. Our society confuses the real meaning of love and physical attraction. Love is a verb of action. Jesus made this clear in the beatitudes and Paul elaborates. Jesus said that we must **love our neighbors as ourselves**. Paul describes love as being patient, unselfish, kind, protecting, trusting, hoping and persevering. By contrast the apostle says that love is not envious, not boastful, not proud, not rude, not self-seeking, not easily angered and not characterized by remembering wrongs suffered. We are not naturally inclined to think and act in these ways. But the practice of loving is possible with God’s help. We can set aside our selfish desires and instincts. We learn about this kind of love raising children; but we should not compliment ourselves too much in this, our children are the extensions of ourselves. The Lord wants us to develop the same habit of loving towards everyone else. This is agape love, the Father’s way of loving, a love that seeks nothing in return. This is the greatest of all human qualities, an attribute of God Himself. The agape love of Jesus changes our world and us. This is living in the coveted ‘state of grace’ and our true worship. As the Apostle reminded the Corinthians, “these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 13:13) And our Lord has promised that faith will bring a 2nd new extraordinary life.

Jesus promised us that, like the thief on the cross next to him, one day we would be with him in Paradise. And a wonder it will be. There will be Animals, and they will not live in violent competition: “lions and wolves will live with lambs and calfs and “a little child shall lead them.” (Isiah 11:6) There will be wonderful Homes beyond our imagination, because Jesus will be the master builder. He promised “ I go to prepare a place for you.” (John 14:3) These homes shall be in a city, made of gold, that is not flat but a cube that is 12,000 stadia on each side. (Revelation 21:16) A stadia is an ancient Greek measurement; 12,000 stadia is 1,400 miles. If the city is organized as a massive cube, moving around it would only be possible if we were no longer restrained by gravity. Finally, the dwelling of God will be with men, and He will “wipe away every tear from their eyes, … and there will be no more death.” (Rev. 21:4) How can we not love and serve him?

 Jesus is Lord, God be praised!

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