



## Love Came Down

By Chris Webb

Christmas is almost here, and on the desk in front of me right now are a small collection of Christmas cards: jolly Santas, wintry scenes, slightly tipsy monks hanging decorations (for some reason people seem to like sending me those). A few are more religiously themed. Little towns under quiet night skies with a bright star hanging in the firmament. Silhouetted camel-riding Magi against a desert sunset. And a few nativity scenes.

It's striking just how lonely the nativity is in all these portrayals. Here's one that's typical: a star shines over an isolated stable with no other building in sight. Weirdly, the stable appears to have one wall missing so we can see inside. A couple of angels perch on the roof; a shepherd boy sits over to one side and shadowy Magi peer around the wall from the other. Illuminated by a slightly unearthly glow in the middle are Mary and Joseph, kneeling in the straw and cradling the infant Jesus. A tiny family, all alone.

Alone, like Mary when Gabriel came to announce the birth. Alone, like Joseph dreaming and also having an angelic vision. Alone, like the three Magi on their journey through the vast Arabian deserts. Alone, like the heavily pregnant Mary on her donkey being led by Joseph on their winding journey to Bethlehem. On every card, in paintings and films, in our popular imagination, the little family is always isolated and alone.

It's an odd image, though, because it has so little to do with the biblical story. Luke, for example, has by far the longest nativity story in the four gospels, and his telling of the tale is almost relentlessly social and communal. Think of the cast of characters: Zechariah and Elizabeth, their priestly community at the Temple, the congregation gathered for the incense offering, and Gabriel coming to announce the birth of John the Baptist. Then Gabriel coming to Mary and steering her towards Zechariah and Elizabeth and their community. John's birth, where his parents are surrounded by neighbours and relatives. Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem with Joseph's family—yes, of course; it's why they travelled to Bethlehem in the first place according to Luke (the stable behind the inn is beautifully romantic, but it's based on a mistranslation; Luke is concerned that there's limited space in the guestroom, not an imaginary inn). Shepherds gathering to celebrate the birth. A few days later a journey to the Temple to be met by Simeon, Anna, and the crowds Anna gathers around them. And all around them, as Luke is at pains to point out, the wider society represented by Herod, Augustus Caesar, and the governor Quirinius. No wonder a nativity play requires such a generous cast!

Even in infancy, Jesus is fulfilling God's passion: creating a God-centered loving community. The birth of a child always seems to draw people together, but Jesus draws more widely than most. Despite the Christmas card images, the women of Bethlehem would almost certainly have gathered around the young mother as she gave birth. And then came the shepherds and Magi representing two polar opposites in society—rich and powerful together with poor and insignificant. Both these groups, strangers to Joseph and Mary, were brought together by their common calling to experience God in Christ. And, of course, the skies rang with the song of the heavenly host as even the celestial society surrounding God's throne was enticed to come near. Far from being lonely and isolated, the holy family would have found God's kingdom community crystallizing around them before Jesus so much as drew his first breath.



I began *God-Soaked Life* by writing about God creating a community of love. “That is his fixation and passion. He is shaping and molding a community of loving people in which he himself can dwell” (p.7). In the final two sections, “Creating Community” and “The Politics of Love” I begin to explore how our response to God’s loving formation of our lives becomes an increasing participation in God-centered community—both the intentional Christian communities we form as families, churches, and in small groups, and the wider society, so often alienated from God and yet in which God is still powerfully and constantly at work.

Both sections are really only sketches. There’s so much to explore in either area: how do we form Jesus-centered community with one another, and how do we as followers of Jesus participate well in the political life of our region and nation? But I’m not really attempting to tackle every nuance of those two questions. Instead, I’m trying to point towards the heart of our response: the kingdom of God announced by Jesus, the loving community indwelt by God.

I think holding the kingdom at the center challenges some of the assumptions we tend to bring to church life and political life. Our churches, for example, have become profoundly shaped by the idea of the “Great Commission”: we are becoming almost obsessively evangelistic, missionary, mission-shaped, and missional, constantly engaged in soul-saving and church-planting, as though “disciples making disciples” is Jesus’ vision of life in all its abundant fullness. Meanwhile our political engagement, mirroring the wider culture, has become ever more polarised between right and left: a spirited spiritual defense is offered for free-market capitalism, state welfare provision, military interventionism, the UN’s millennium development goals, or even for particular political parties or movements, as though any of these positions were simply obvious gospel truth. And this despite the paucity of economic models, domestic policy, and international trade regulation offered in the Sermon on the Mount.

But somewhere along the line one thing seems to have been lost: love. The one thing Jesus consistently identified as his great commission, as the heart and soul of God’s ancient law and his own new commandment. The one constant theme of his preaching and teaching. The one uniting thread of his ministry. Oh, we talk about love all the time, of course: God’s love for us, our love for God, the call to love our neighbors, our brothers and sisters in Christ, even our enemies. But in the midst of our bitter political rows, our church splits, our passionate arguments over human sexuality, biblical interpretation, styles of worship, gender politics, and a million minutiae of doctrinal essentials, the one thing we Christians are rarely accused of is an excess of love. The ancient historian Tertullian quoted the Romans as exclaiming: “See how these Christians love one another!” But that seems unlikely to be a headline in the *Washington Post* or London’s *Daily Telegraph* anytime soon.

Unless ... unless, of course, we really open ourselves to a more God-soaked life, which must always mean a more love-soaked life. A life in which it’s more important to love than to convert, more important to love than to control, more important to love than to be right. A life which seeks to draw people together, even polar opposites, rather than drive them apart. A life in which we’re passionate about building relationships and creating communities. A life which sees other people as a gift to be embraced, not a problem to be solved or a threat to be countered.

And maybe Christmas is the perfect time to be reflecting on all this. A chance to step back from the lonely isolation of those Christmas card stables and to be reminded of the words of Christina Rossetti in her hymn “Love came down at Christmas”:

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Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, Love Divine,  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,  
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,  
Worship we our Jesus,  
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,  
Love be yours and love be mine,  
Love to God and all men,  
Love for plea and gift and sign.