

**Comfort & Joy: Love** (The very first Christmas tradition)  
December 13, 2015  
Luke Knight

“The experience of salvation is humility and joy. We see humility in the loneliness of God, in the face of a baby. We rejoice at the love of God who sanctifies all men by becoming one of them, by becoming lowly.” (Abbott, Westminster Abby, Mission)

## **A CRYING BABY**

So, we’ve entered this season of hope, peace, love and joy but it all began, to our continual awe and wonder, with a baby crying in manger.

Let’s begin with Philippians 2. 5-8, arguably the most shocking and wonderful few phrases ever written in human history.

### **Philippians 2.5-8**

*5 You must have the same attitude that Christ had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. 7 Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, 8 he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross.*

The Christmas story tells us that God got uncomfortable, but he did so for our benefit.

Sovereign, mighty, agent of creation Jesus, one with Father and Spirit became, as the carol says, “our brother”. *“Jesus our brother strong and good was humbly laid in a stable room.”*

So fully “our brother” we can say with some level of speculative certainty that the baby Jesus likely cried, and *Away in a Manger* is inaccurate – some crying he probably made.

## **WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?**

Now I wonder if we asked people if they thought Christmas was about love, if they’d probably agree. Lots of ideas about love out there, aren’t there? But what does Love at Christmas really mean?

Paul tells the Philippians that God displayed a certain *kind* of love at Christmas. That God loved the world by arriving in a humble Jesus. And this Jesus-kind-of-love transfixed and transformed the world.

Via Paul's words we see that it was Jesus who introduced humanity to the virtue of *humility*. And this humility (this selfless love) demonstrates who God is and what his love looks like.

Did you know that Jesus made humility popular? It wasn't considered a positive trait in the ancient world prior to Jesus. (Dickson, *Humilitas*).

Jesus, the God-King, acted differently than any leader before him: the pharaohs with their pyramids, the Emperors of China with their armies of zombie-like terracotta warriors, and especially the Roman rulers.

The first Emperor of China's terracotta army (200 BC) was found in 1974: 8,000 soldiers, 130 chariots, 670 horses – all dedicated to accompanying the Emperor in the afterlife. A tomb taking decades to construct, a fortune to build.

Jesus was laid in an feeding trough as a baby, and upon death his body was laid in a borrowed tomb. Nobody labored over his burial – his funeral was actually rather rushed.

The Roman Emperor Nero lived a few years after Jesus. One historian writes of his character: "Nero wanted to be close to the people, but as their god, not their friend."

So Nero thought he was a big deal. He even built a 103ft statue of himself in his palace courtyard. The statue of Liberty is 111ft. Can you imagine today if Doug built a 103ft statue of himself next to the security hut? What would that say about his opinion of himself?

Doug wouldn't do that. He wouldn't because he carries the attitude Jesus introduced – humility.

Nero was a man, but wanted to live like a God. The gospels (and Paul here in Philippians) say that Jesus was God, but chose to live like an ordinary man.

Dickson defines humility this way: *A humble person is marked by a willingness to hold power in service of others.* (Dickson, *Humilitas*).

This is how Jesus entered our world, lived and died. With loving humility.

Jesus became vulnerable for our benefit. Even though most babies in Nativity plays are plastic, Jesus wasn't, and he was fully prepared and willing to be poked and prodded so we could know what God is like.

To be handled, touched, known, abused, eventually giving up his life for his brothers and sisters, for the enemies he called friends – you and me. That's love. That's why we give gifts at Christmas, because Jesus gave us himself.

We, Paul instructs the Philippians, must do the same. We must embody humility and showcase who God really is by living as Jesus did. We must live this way, and especially at Christmas.

## **THE FIRST CHRISTMAS TRADITION**

What does Paul say? Simply follow Jesus' lead and continue the tradition. To demonstrate and define God for other another by living as Jesus did: in humble service. In Jesus' own words, loving one another as they loved themselves. (Mark 12, Matthew 22).

I love traditions at Christmas, especially tree cutting. This is amongst my most favorite Christmas traditions.

A humble willingness to lovingly serve others embodies and expresses the Christmas story better than any tradition you could think of.

Better than tree trimming, turkey gorging, eggnog glugging, present wrapping, present *un*wrapping, sneaky mistletoe kissing and even beloved carol singing. It is the content of the carols we must pay attention to. As lovely as they sound, what is their message?

### ***Ah, Holy Jesus (Johann Heermann, 1585-1657)***

*Lo, the Good Shepherd for the sheep is offered;  
the slave hath sinned, and the Son hath suffered.  
For our atonement, while we nothing heeded,  
God interceded.*

*For me, kind Jesus, was thy incarnation,  
thy mortal sorrow, and thy life's oblation;  
thy death of anguish and thy bitter passion,  
for my salvation.*

Humble service is the most ancient and accurate of Christmas traditions. By loving selflessly we celebrate Christmas best.

There are two questions we can take away today. The first pertains to God's gift of love to us (I don't think you can love out of lack), and the second to how it manifests itself in daily life.

- How can I receive God's humble love this Christmas?
  - Our prayer would be to lift words from Joy to the World, "Let every heart prepare him room."
- How might I practice this humble love this Christmas?

This season, at its core, is about humility and joy. We reflect on the humble arrival of a God willing to get uncomfortable on our behalf, who understands our struggle. Face to face, eye to eye, cry to cry.

With a loving, humble cry Jesus entered our mess and darkness, and with a victorious cry on the cross he leads us out of it.

This is why we have reason to live humble but joyful lives, especially this time of year....and that's what we're going to look at next week! What is Christmas joy and how can I get some?