Love Divine, All Loves Excelling: The Christian Message in Song
LOVE DIVINE, ALL LOVE’S EXCELLING

Text: Charles Wesley (1707—1788)

Love divine, all Love's excelling,
Joy of Heaven to earth come down;
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded love Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation;
Enter every trembling heart.

Breathe O breathe thy loving Spirit
into every troubled breast!
Let us all with Thee inherit,
Let us finds that second rest.
Take away our bent from sinning,
Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith as its beginning,
set out heart at liberty.

Come Almighty to deliver,
Let us all Thy life receive.
Suddenly return and never,
ever more Thy temples leave.
Thee we would always blessing,
serve Thee as Thy hosts above;
Pray and praise Thee without ceasing,
Glory in Thy perfect love.

Finish then Thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.
The inspiration of this exposition came in a pastoral visit to my friend and mentor, Dr. Dennis Kinlaw, while he was recovering from a serious illness. We discussed the meaning of this song during my visit. Upon my return, I expanded the notes and added the Trinitarian emphasis to his emphasis of God’s “one way” love for us. This sermon is, in part, an elaboration of that conversation and the centrality of God’s love to the story we find ourselves in.
Sometimes it is helpful to be reminded of the big story, or if you are visual, the “big picture.” Elizabeth and I were recently in Venice with two other couples from the parish. I did not sufficiently prepare for the trip. When we disembarked from the train I was engulfed with a dizzying array of sights, sounds and feelings from this enchanted city. I stayed in that state of over-stimulation for twenty four hours. On the second day a seasoned guide walked us through the city, combining history, architecture and religion to her overview of Venice. In time, the various parts began to make sense within the whole picture she gave us.

We often need the peripheral in order to make sense of the particular. The parts of life, like the parts of a great novel or poem or city, often make sense only in terms of the whole. One of the most memorable “big picture” portrayals of the Christian message is Charles Wesley’s, *Love Divine, All Love’s Excelling*. Along with two other hymns, it was the most listened to hymn in the history of Christendom. William and Kate had it sung at their wedding in April 2011. A billion people heard the whole Christian story in song. Were you aware of what you were singing or hearing?

The hymn has four verses. The first three verses tell about the work of each person of the Trinity, and does so in terms of love—the very nature of God. Additionally, the last line of every verse is an enjambment: the meaning cascades over the line break into the next line of the next verse. This is good poetics and good theology. Each person of the Trinity is distinct: The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Spirit. But each person shares the same nature: love. Wesley underscores this by making the meaning of the last line of each verse carry over into the next line of the next verse. The last verse is the consummation of salvation in us as we follow the path of salvation in the three prior verse/stanzas. Let’s look briefly at each of the verses of the hymn. They are as beautiful and
poignant a summary of Christianity as you are likely to ever read or hear:

**Love Divine, all loves excelling. Joy of heaven to earth come down.**

The first verse tells us the subject of the hymn. It is about divine love, not human love. This is one way love, not two way love. This love has its origins in heaven, not earth. God is the sole author of this love. And its character is joy. This is a radical and other-oriented love.

**Fix in us Thy humble dwelling; All Thy Faithful mercies crown**

This love has a goal. God intends to dwell in us. This is not merely a declaration of love but an impartation of love. This will ensure, as St. Teresa of Avila often said, that we experience a bit heaven before we get to heaven. Of all God’s gifts, the love of God is the “crowning” gift.

**Jesus, Thou art all compassion, Pure, unbounded love Thou art**

Now we are told that this love has a face. Love is neither a mere force nor an abstraction of doctrine. Divine love is neither an emotion nor a commitment; Love is a personal presence. His name is Jesus. Wesley starts his hymn with the second person of the Trinity because this is a song of salvation and this is where salvation begins for every person: in coming to terms with the person of Jesus Christ, who is pure, unbounded love. This, by the way, is why the first talk on the Alpha course, is “Who is Jesus?” We want people to know God and we tell them right up front, the God of Christianity, the God of the universe is Christ-like. See Jesus and you have seen the Father (John 14:9).

**Visit us with Thy salvation; enter every trembling heart.**

Salvation comes to us from the outside. If we could save ourselves, Christ need not identify with and suffer for us. Salvation comes from without, but it must come within.
Salvation originates outside of us in God. However it is not salvation for us until it enters our “trembling hearts.” But our trembling hearts can sometimes be nearly impenetrable. So we continue with the second verse.

**Breathe O Breathe Thy loving Spirit into Every troubled breast**

This second verse states the work of the Third person of the Trinity. Notice the object of that work (it carries over from the last verse of the previous verse/stanza): from “trembling heart” to “troubled breast.” These are similar but not identical phenomena. The “trembling heart” signifies the fear of intimacy because God is coming close to us in Jesus. This experience often causes us to break out in songs of praise. The experience of faith in Jesus is that of joy in a new found love. But “troubled breast” suggest not the fear of intimacy with God but despair over our continued sin. Indeed, after joy new Christians often experience despair. After coming to faith we realize for the first time what sinners actually are. Keeping company with Jesus does that to you. Our imagined goodness does not measure up to his real goodness. But walking with Jesus will lead to a deeper repentance which issues forth in genuine goodness. The kindness of God, as St. Paul argued, leads to repentance (Romans 2:4).

**Let us all in Thee inherit, Let us find that second rest**

The word “inherit” suggests this is of divine origin. An inheritance is not self-generated. We inherit what someone else has given. The Spirit wants us to experience a deeper rest from sin. This is the promise of sanctification—being increasingly freed from that power of sin, not just its penalty. Our final inheritance is deliverance is from the very presence of sin. Now in light of this, we should not be surprised to hear this longing for liberation:

**Take away our bent to sinning, Alpha and Omega be/End of faith as its beginning, set our hearts at liberty.**
This is a cry for the pure love of God as the center of our being and experience. It is the pure love of God of which Augustine spoke so powerfully when he said that “seeing God’s face” should be our greatest desire. Salvation is not an object, it is a subject. IT is the very presence of God, it is union with God in unbroken friendship. And this presence is a holy-love that cleanses all that it touches. And what it touches it frees. As Paul said, perfect love cast out fear. The goal of salvation is embedded in its very beginning. We are moving more and more from glory to glory until we are ready to see His face. Salvation is becoming fitted for an eternal friendship with God in a new creation.

Come Almighty to deliver, Let us all Thy Life receive.

Wesley devotes the third verse of his hymn of praise to the First person of the Trinity. Though the Father comes first in the order of the persons, he usually comes last in our experience. The Spirit draws us to the Son and the Son, who is in bosom of the Father, makes the Father known to us (John 1:18). This is the pathway of grace and mercy. Wesley is spelling out the itinerary of salvation.

The request of the Father is to “deliver us.” The petition is placed in the positive—“all Thy life receive.” To receive God’s life is to receive all the benefits of his life—forgiveness and cleansing from sin. The life of God brings the gifts of deliverance: past deliverance from the penalty of sin, present deliverance from the power of sin, and future deliverance from the presence of sin. Deliverance is aimed at all that which divides and separates us from God and one another. And the agent of that deliverance is nothing less the very life of the Father. We are not just saved from something, but saved for something—in fact, saved for someone!

Suddenly return and never, never more Thy temples leave;

A subtheme of this hymn is that God has chosen to abide—not in the Temple of Jerusalem, or even in the heavens alone, but
in the human heart. We are God’s temple (I Corinthians 3:16),
the very habitation of God. Additionally, unlike the dwelling
place in the Garden, or Tabernacle, or Temple—the human
heart is to be a permanent dwelling place. These former
habitations are the shadows; the heart is the substance. The
prayer is more specific still: we ask not only that God abides
in us but that He will never leave us. This raises the issue of
apostasy. Is it possible to experience salvation and lose it? The
hymn, just like scriptures suggests that it is possible (Hebrews
6:1-8). I would add: fall outside the message of this hymn,
which is the message of the Bible, and you fall outside of
salvation. This is a salvation song. Let us instead hide it in our
hearts and abide in the fair beauty of the Lord.

**Thee we would be always blessing, Serve Thee as Thy hosts above**

Now we sing the consequence of salvation. It issues in a life
of blessing and serving God, taking our place with the angels
in heaven. Heaven is God’s space. It is that inter-locking,
intersecting, usually hidden space running parallel to the
visible creation. The Nicene Creed names both—heaven and
earth—as God’s creation. Worship can be one of those times
and places where heaven and earth intersect. Our worship
should be a little heaven on earth. I rejoice that at Truro, it is.

**Pray and praise Thee without ceasing, Glory in Thy perfect love.**

Worship leads to contemplation—a life of unceasing prayer
and praise, abiding in the perfect love of God. This is the goal
of worship and worship is the goal of life. Contemplation is
therefore our natural habitat and fulfilling purpose. This is
another way into the “original experiences” that John Paul II
explores in his Theology of the Body. Contemplation is not a
state of prayer as much as it is a state of living in this life from
the perspective of the future—a healed and redeemed world.
It is having the windows of our souls purified so that we really
“see” life as God sees it. Contemplation teaches us to see others as God really sees them. It is the awareness that Jesus truly is the author and finisher of our faith, he is the creator and redeemer of the world (Ephesians 1:3-10).

**Finish then Thy new creation, Pure and spotless let us be;**

All three members of the Trinity participate in creation and salvation. This final verse describes the work of salvation as a “new creation.” In the first creation, God starts with heaven and earth and ends with humanity. But in the new creation, he begins to recreate the world by starting with humanity (in the incarnation) and culminating with heaven and earth. Why does God go in reverse this time around? Is it because He does not want us to mess up the world again? If He gets the stewards of creation right first, then He knows we can be entrusted with a new Creation. So Wesley adds, “pure and spotless let us be.” This will be on each of our resumes, part of what qualifies us to steward a new heaven and new earth: we will be pure and spotless. Sin is gone. And what has been transformed cannot be transmitted.

**Let us see Thy great salvation, Perfectly restored in Thee**

Now we sing a remarkable truth about this salvation: it is perfectly restored in God first. Creation participates in God’s life because there is no life apart from God. God is not one being among many but the ground of all reality, all beings. Creation is restored, healed and saved when all alienation from God has been rectified—thus the restoration of Creation occurs because it has been reconciled and restored into perfect communion with its source—the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The only way to restore anything is to restore it in God.

**Changed from glory into glory, Till heaven we take our place**

This song is full of scriptural echoes and allusions. This comes from 2 Corinthians 3:18: And we all with unveiled faces,
beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into
the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this
comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Salvation is about transformation. And transformation results
from personal, face to face relation with God. What Moses
asked for and was denied, is ours through grace (see Exodus
33:20). Heaven is a place of unbroken, unfiltered, unfettered
fellowship and communion in love.

**Till we cast our crowns before Thee. Lost in wonder, love and praise.**

We conclude our song in complete adoration. Like the
woman who poured her costly perfume on Jesus’ feet, our
achievements and treasures also pale in comparison to our
Lord’s work of redeeming us. What crowns, what achievement,
what rewards will you give the King of Kings and Lord of
Lords? St Teresa is correct. We don’t have to wait for heaven
to experience heaven. We can praise Him now. This is the
way, simultaneously, of both relevance and faithfulness. We
can and should lose ourselves in wonder, love and praise.
Moreover, if we know the big story we find ourselves in,
we will.

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This hymn suggests an answer to the query Robert Jenson placed before us in his landmark article “How the World Lost Its Story” (First Things: Oct. 1993). He writes, reminiscent of Wesley’s hymn: It is the whole vision of an Eschaton that is now missing outside the church. The assembly of believers must therefore itself be the event in which we may behold what is to come. Nor is this necessity new in the life of the church. For what purpose, after all, do we think John the Seer recorded his visions?