In my last parish we commissioned a mosaic which hung on the outside of the East wall of the church facing the street. The mosaic was simply the word ‘Love’ created in graffiti-style. It hung there for several years without a great deal of comment as part of the community garden we created until one Christmas, in high winds, it was blown down from its position on the East wall; quite literally a case of ‘Love came down at Christmas’.

Christina Rossetti’s wonderful carol, from which that phrase comes, focuses on the Christ-child as the ultimate expression of love:

‘Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas ...

Love incarnate, love divine’

Through these words, she reminds us that God is love and that the incarnation - God become human - is as much a sign of love for us as is Christ’s crucifixion. As the Apostle John wrote, “God showed his love for us by sending his only Son into the world, so that we might have life through him. This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven” (1 John 4, 9 & 10). That is what she means by that marvellous phrase “Love came down at Christmas.” The incarnation is at the heart of Christianity because it is a sign of the love that God has for us. God loves us so much that he is prepared to become one of us, even though this means huge constraints and ultimately leads to his death.

On Christmas Day last year Peter Wehner, an opinion writer for the New York Times, argued in a piece for that paper that: 'Because the Christmas story has been told so often for so long, it’s easy even for Christians to forget how revolutionary Jesus’ birth was. The idea that God would become human and dwell among us, in circumstances both humble and humiliating, shattered previous assumptions.' As a result, ‘we ... do well to remind ourselves of the true meaning of the incarnation.’ (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/25/opinion/the-christmas-revolution.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share&_r=1)

So what is that true meaning and what does it mean that love came down? When I have run Quiet Days on prayer in everyday life, I have often used a prayer by David Adam which provides a simple answer to this question.

**Escalator prayer**

As I ascend this stair
I pray for all who are in despair
All who have been betrayed
All who are dismayed
All who are distressed
All who feel depressed
All ill and in pain
All who are driven insane
All whose hope has flown
All who are alone
All homeless on the street
All who with danger meet

Lord, who came down to share our plight
Lift them into your love and light

(David Adam, PowerLines: Celtic Prayers about Work, Triangle, 1992)

This prayer uses the imagery of descending and ascending an escalator to ask that those at the bottom of the descent will be understood and ministered to before being raised up. The prayer is based on the understanding that, through his incarnation and nativity, Christ comes into the messiness of human life, as a human being, to experience, for himself, all that we experience; the betrayals, dismay, distress, depression, illness, pain, insanity, loss of hope, loneliness, homelessness, danger and despair that many of us experience at periods in our lives and which some experience as their everyday life.

Christ comes to understand all this and to bear it on his shoulders to God, through his death on the cross, in order that, like him, we too can rise to new life and ascend to the life of God himself. “Lord, who came down to share our plight / Lift them into your love and light.” This is the hope held out to us through the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem; that he was born into poverty, exile, danger, stigma for our sake, in order to be one with us in our lives. Jesus was born to be Emmanuel – God with us. As John 1. 14 says, in the contemporary translation of the Bible called The Message: “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.” This is what Rossetti meant by that marvellous phrase “Love came down at Christmas”.

Because God, through Christ’s birth, has entered our world and moved into our neighbourhood, he has identified himself with us. As we have reflected, he became a human being experiencing the whole trajectory of human existence from conception through birth, puberty, adulthood to death, including all that we experience along the way in terms of relationships, experiences, emotions and temptations. He has been made like us, his brothers and sisters, in every way, tempted in every way just as we are and able to sympathize with our weaknesses. As Hebrews 4. 16 say: “He’s been through weakness and testing, experienced it all — all but the sin.”

This can be seen as the fulfilment of a promise of God recorded in Isaiah 43. 1 - 3:

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.”
That then means that, as we pass through life’s challenges, we never walk alone. As a result, we have a reason to sing, with the fans of Liverpool F.C.:

“Walk on, through the wind
Walk on, through the rain
Though your dreams be tossed and blown
Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart
And you’ll never walk alone.
You’ll never walk alone.”

The wonderful result of love come down at Christmas - of Christ’s nativity and incarnation – is that God is with us in all of our experiences. He is the one who leads us beside the still waters and walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death and he can do this because in Jesus he has experienced human life for himself. As a result, God understands and will be alongside us in all our experiences. God’s promise is that he will be with us as we walk the path of life and that is where true security is to be found.

As we know from our online lives: ‘... there is no substitute for being there - incarnate or, literally, in the flesh.’ No amount of words that we send ‘by post or by telephone or over social networking sites - can ever match the visceral reality of presence.’ ‘Face to phone or face to screen’ can ‘never match face to face’ (Rhidian Brook, Thought for the Day) and that is why Love came down at Christmas.

The novelist Charles Williams suggests, in ‘The Descent of the Dove,’ that the incarnation, because it is not simply about God taking on flesh but also about our humanity being taken up into God, is also the ultimate affirmative act. This is based on the understanding that nothing is lost and everything can be redeemed. All experience and all images are ultimately to be gathered in and up to God and, in this sense, the beauty found in the selfless giving of the incarnation and crucifixion really will save the world.

So, by becoming one with us through the incarnation – by being the Love which came down at Christmas - God is able to be with us through times of darkness until we come to live with him in the light forever. As David Adam prays, Lord, who came down to share our plight, lift us all into your love and light. Amen.