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What does love mean?

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As part of a survey to gain a better understanding of how people across society viewed the very intriguing question of love, and what it means to them, a group of 4 to 8 year olds were asked the question, "What does love mean?"

"Well", replied Karl aged 5, "Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on after shave and they go out and smell each other."

Billy aged 4 said, "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know your name is safe in their mouth".

Six year old Mark saw love a little differently. "Love is when Mummy sees Daddy on the toilet and she doesn't think it's gross," was his down to earth reply.

It was then that 7 year old Bobby came up with a beauty. "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen."

How beautiful is that!

"Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen. "

Love!

You can't reach out and touch it. You can't package it and sell it. But you know it when you see it, and you feel it when it touches you.

Like the little 4 year old boy whose elderly neighbour was a man who had just lost his wife. Seeing the old man crying, the little fellow went into the old man's yard, climbed onto his lap and just sat there. When his mum asked the little chap what he said to the old man, he replied, "Nothing, I just helped him cry."

That's love!

Or the young girl in her early teens caught up in the middle of a scandalous, unexplainable pregnancy, who, despite the odds stacked against her of angry and bewildered parents, a community baying for her blood, and a boyfriend who is hurt and angered by the thought of betrayal, and mystified, to say the least, by her unbelievable explanation of the whole affair, can burst into a song of magnificent praise to God for all that's happened to her.

Well perhaps when you realize that there's nothing left but God, it's then that you find out that God is all you need.

That's love; the kind of love, dedication, passion and faith we hear from a young girl called Mary each year as we come to celebrate Christmas.

Mary had been told by God via a visit from an angel that she would become pregnant and that the baby would be a boy and that she was to name him Jesus. Mary poses the question about how it would all happen and is quite calmly told that it would be the work of the Holy Spirit. But then in order to give Mary some reassurance and probably to indicate to her that the impossible is possible – with God anyway – the angel tells the young Mary the her older cousin who is by normal standards too old to be pregnant, is also very much to her surprise expecting a baby. And all this teenage girl can say is, “Well, let it happen as you’ve said”.

Amazing!

So what is she to do?

In her opinion there is only one thing to do, so she heads off into the isolation of the hills to see her cousin Elizabeth. And what happens is absolutely incredible. An older woman looked down upon as a disgrace because she couldn’t become pregnant, and a young girl who shouldn’t be pregnant, dancing and singing praises to the Lord because they were both pregnant.

“Oh how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Saviour”, sings Mary.

And this is a girl who is at odds with her parents, not at all in the good books with her fiancée, and in danger of being stoned to death by her community.

Amazing isn’t it?

So if ever you think that things are tough for you.

If you think that you are hard done by, that no one has ever had to endure what you’ve had to put up with; well think again.

It was God’s love that placed Mary in this disgraceful situation – God’s love for you and me. And he picked an absolute beauty to carry out his task. A young girl who believed; a young girl who loved; a young girl who praised God for what he was doing through her – even though she had no idea what he was actually doing, and what it would mean for her. That’s the kind of love that turned the world around.

Amazing grace at it’s best.

Some time ago I happened hear a bit of an address that Professor Ian Lowe, the president of the Australian Conservation Foundation gave to the National Press Club. It was a good speech and Ian Lowe didn’t hold back on his views on where we are headed and the direction that we should take in regard to the sustainability of our country and world.

In the middle of his speech he mentioned a Pete Seeger concert he’d attended, and how in the middle of the multitude of folk songs he was performing, he sang Amazing Grace. Pete Seeger explained how the writer of the song, John Newton, was a slave trader who had an amazing conversion, and who in the middle of one of his trips with a ship full of slaves came to the conclusion that while slave trading was “economically sustainable”, it was in fact, “morally untenable”. So he turned the ship around and freed the slaves.

Ian Lowe said that the responsibility of turning the ship around conservation wise lies with each one of us.

Against impossible odds and in unlikely circumstances a young girl called Mary believed God and trusted him enough to place herself in his hands, and because of the love of a young girl and her incredible God the ship was turned around for us – and we are free. Set free by the amazing love of God.

As the Seekers sing:

It's Amazing, it's Amazing.
I've spent my life star gazing.
And all the time I've been saving.
This amazing love for you.

So as we prepare to celebrate Christmas in 2009, we may well ask the question, "What does love mean?"

As 7 year old Bobby said, "It's what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen."

So now is a good time to stop star gazing and allow the beautiful story of Christmas to show us the meaning of love in all it's fullness; a baby in a manger; a young girl who believed; an adoptive dad who trusted; and a God who gave from his heart for the life of the world.