

Week 13: Nativity

God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

Text: Traditional English

- Earliest published copy dates from 1650 with the opening line “Sit you, merry Gentlemen”
- The now-traditional opener “God rest you merry, gentlemen” first appeared circa 1700
- “Rest you merry” was a common parting phrase and greeting of the 16th century, with “rest” interpreted in an archaic sense as “keep”
- In addition to usages in Shakespearean plays, Thomas Elyot’s *Dictionary* of 1538 included this note:
“Aye, bee thou gladd: or joyful, as the vulgare people saie Reste you mery.”
- Regarded as the most popular of English carols, it’s not surprising to find it is the one carol Charles Dickens chose to quote in “A Christmas Carol”:
...at the first sound of —
‘God bless you, merry gentleman! May nothing you dismay!’
Scrooge seized the ruler with such energy of action, that the singer fled in terror, leaving the keyhole to the fog and even more congenial frost.
- Its popularity led to numerous 19th-century political (and other) parodies

Tune: Traditional English

- The tune CHESTNUT is descended from a tune in *The English Dancing Master* from 1651 titled “Chestnut (or Doves Figary)”
 - As the tune is common in folk music of continental Europe, scholars suspect it may have been imported to England by way of France
 - A variety of evolving forms were published in the early 1800s, reaching its “modern” form in 1871
1. A simple carol, the text is not theologically deep but does have one key theme — contrasting the “comfort and joy” of Christmas against fear and dismay. What is the source of that “dismay” and why should Christmas counteract that? How do the angel and shepherds fit into this message?
 - a. The angel says “Fear not” ... is this a message to the shepherds scared at the sight of an angel? Or is it a message to the whole world, that we need not fear the grave?
 - b. The contrast of joy and dismay is mirrored in the opposition between God and Satan
 - c. The incarnation means Jesus was fully God and fully human, yet the carol seems to focus exclusively on Christ’s deity at the expense of his humanity.

Angels We Have Heard on High

Text: Traditional French

- Originally an 18th century French carol known as “Les Anges dans nos Campagnes”
- First translated into English in 1862 by James Chadwick, a Catholic Bishop in northeast England
- Many protestant hymnals choose to modify or omit Chadwick’s fourth verse about Mary and Joseph

Tune: Traditional French

- Tradition says shepherds in the south of France at Christmastime would call to each other “Gloria in excelsis deo”, imitating a 2nd-century Latin chorale sung on Christmas Eve
- This was joined with a French folk tune to form the version of GLORIA we know today
- James Montgomery’s text “Angels from the Realms of Glory” was also originally sung to this tune, prior to the composition of its current tune REGENT SQUARE by Henry Smart

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Text: Phillips Brooks (1835–1893), 1868

- Harvard-educated Episcopal pastor in Philadelphia (1859-69) and Trinity Church, Boston (1869-91)
- In addition to his preaching, was perhaps best known for his affection for children’s ministry

- Took a year sabbatical in the Holy Land in 1865, including a stop in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve
- Returning to Philadelphia, Brooks wrote the text for a Sunday school children's Christmas celebration

Tune: Lewis H. Redner (1831–1908), 1868

- Organist at Holy Trinity Church where Brooks was pastoring, and wrote the tune at his request
 - As the story has it, Redner struggled to compose a suitable tune and only finished it in a flash of insight during the middle of the night, on the day before the hymn was to be performed
 - Brooks was so pleased with the tune, he half-jokingly suggested it be named "St. Lewis"; when it was published, it was spelled so as not to embarrass Redner
1. These hymns paint two opposing pictures of the Nativity — in "Angels We Have Heard on High", a loud, joyous proclamation of praise for Jesus' birth, but in "O Little Town of Bethlehem" a quiet, somber scene. Which do you find more accurate? Are there lessons to be learned from both perspectives?
 - a. Biblically speaking, "Angels We Have Heard on High" is not wrong
 - i. Luke 2:13-14 describes a "multitude" of angels praising God
 - ii. In addition, the shepherds also praise God in Luke 2:20
 - iii. The "mountains in reply" is reminiscent of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem when he says in Luke 19:40, "if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."
 - b. Bethlehem's "stillness" could be literal, informed by Brook's visit to Israel
 - i. In the 19th century just as the 1st, Israel had no electric lights or street lamps
 - c. Or perhaps Brooks' "silence" can be interpreted as a metaphor
 - i. "No ear may hear his coming" ... "while mortals sleep": the silence is a reflection of humanity's unawareness of the meaning of Christ's birth and life and death
 - ii. The darkness of the world contrasts His eternal light
 - iii. "Morning stars" are reminiscent of Job 38:4-7, describing the world's creation:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth ... when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?
 - d. Remember Brooks' focus on children; the world shows a childlike ignorance
 - i. Original fourth verse references "children pure and happy" praying to the "blessed child"
 - ii. Internal rhyme in lines 3 and 7 of each stanza gives a "singsong" character
 - iii. When explained that Brooks had died and gone to heaven, a five-year-old girl of the church remarked, "How happy the angels will be!"

We Three Kings

Text: John H. Hopkins (1820–1891), 1857

- First worked as a reporter and tutor while studying law, then attended General Theological Seminary in northern Manhattan, graduating in 1850
- Returned in 1855 to serve as the seminary's first instructor of church music
- Wrote "We Three Kings" for a Christmas pageant held at General Theological Seminary
- Coincidentally, 40 years earlier the land for the seminary had been donated by Clement Clarke Moore, son of an Episcopal bishop and author of the poem "Twas the Night Before Christmas"

Tune: John H. Hopkins (1820–1891), 1857

- Composed the tune KINGS OF ORIENT at the same time as its text
 - Not a prolific author or composer, he edited and published a large number of hymn collections, including the collection *Great Hymns of the Church* by John Freeman Young (translator of "Silent Night")
1. Technically an "Epiphany" hymn, the first verse is as inaccurate as Nativity scenes that place the shepherds and wise men side-by-side at the manger. That said, the hymn's larger message exploring the symbolism of the gifts of the magi are entirely on-point. When you look at the three attributes listed (sovereignty, deity, sacrifice), are there any you feel are underappreciated or receive less focus at Christmas than you think they should?

- a. *Gold*: Jesus as King
 - i. What does it mean to have a baby for a king?
 - ii. What kind of king is He? Remember in John 6:15, after the feeding of the five thousand, the crowds wanted to crown Jesus king and he ran away
- b. *Frankincense*: Jesus as God
 - i. Frankincense was used in anointing oils and burned as a holy incense
 - ii. The Incarnation is central to Christmas (or should be!)
 - iii. Jesus was named Emmanuel (Matthew 1:23), meaning “God with us”
 - iv. Frankincense also has medicinal value, alluding to Jesus’ role as the “Great Physician” (for example, see Luke 5:31-32)
- c. *Myrrh*: Jesus as Sacrifice
 - i. The name “Myrrh” is derived from the Hebrew word for “bitterness”
 - ii. Recall “the wormwood and the gall” from “Go to Dark Gethsemane”
 - iii. Mark 15:23 says the Roman soldiers offered Jesus wine mixed with myrrh while on the cross (Matthew 27:34 records it as vinegar with gall); it was also used for embalming
 - iv. Myrrh comes from tree resin, so harvesting it requires piercing the tree into its sapwood, repeatedly wounding the tree to bleed the myrrh
- d. Traditions of the Magi
 - i. In the Western church, traditional names are Melchior, Balthazar, and Caspar
 - ii. Often depicted as young, old, and middle-aged, and of different ethnicities (traditionally Persian, Arabian, and Indian, although also Ethiopian or Chinese)
 - iii. In German-speaking countries, Catholics will often mark the initials “C+M+B” in chalk above the door for the new year, symbolizing both the initials of the magi and the phrase “Christus mansionem benedicat”, meaning “may Christ bless this house”