

Week 14: Christmas

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Text: Charles Wesley (1707–1788), 1739

- Written less than a year after Wesley's conversion in May of 1738
- Wesley's original opening line read "Hark! how all the welkin rings / Glory to the King of Kings", with "welkin" being an archaic term used to mean "sky" or "heavens"
- This was altered to the current version by George Whitefield in 1753

Tune: Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847), 1840

- Originally written as a chorus in Mendelssohn's cantata "Festgesang", honoring the 400th anniversary of Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press
 - This was adapted into a hymn tune by British organist W. H. Cummings in 1857
 - First paired with this text in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861
1. This hymn, written specifically as a "Hymn for Christmas-Day", has a grand, triumphant sense to it. What is it about the text and tune that contribute to this feeling?
 - a. Wesley's original "welkin" carries a sense of largeness, both in the vastness of the whole celestial heavens, but also in the magnitude of the sound ("make the welkin ring" was a common idiom used to describe a loud noise)
 - b. The line "Universal Nature say" also points to the all-encompassing nature of Christ's birth
 - c. The tune MENDELSSOHN uses wide intervals and a strong meter for a grand sound
 - d. "All ye Nations, rise" calls all nations of the earth to proclaim the Good News
 2. Is it proper to have such boisterous, jubilant Christmas music, when only two of the four gospels consider Christmas important enough to include in their narrative? How much effort do we put into Christmas festivities compared to Easter? Is the current balance where it should be?
 - a. Clearly, the power and significance of Christmas is that it foreshadows Easter.
 - i. "God and Sinners reconciled": were they actually reconciled before Christ's crucifixion?
 - ii. "Born to give us Second Birth": as Jesus rose from the dead, so too will we
 - b. On the other hand, Christmas has a long history in the church, though not without opposition.
 - i. There are no records of Christmas in the earliest church, with its members far more interested in Christ's second coming than His first.
 - ii. The first recognition of Christ's birth was in connection with Epiphany on January 6th.
 - iii. In 245, Origen noted that in the Bible, only wicked men are seen celebrating their birthdays (Pharaoh and Herod) while holy men (Jeremiah and Job) curse the day they were born.
 - iv. Celebration of Christmas by the Donatists in North Africa could indicate the institution of Christmas as a church feast happened prior to their split in 311.
 - v. The placement of Christmas on December 25th in the Catholic church comes from the Chronography of 354 AD, with the Eastern church following later in 388.
 - vi. 17th-century English dissenters (such as Puritans) viewed Christmas celebrations as a Catholic tradition, calling them "trappings of popery"

Of the Father's Love Begotten

Text: Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348–413), c. 405

- A successful Spanish lawyer, Prudentius rose to become a regional governor in the Roman empire
- At the age of 57, he left public life, retired to a monastery and focused on writing poetry
- Prudentius' *Liber Cathemerinon* ("Book of the Christian Day") contains 12 Latin poems, one for each hour of the day, with this text excerpted from the 9th hour
- Initially translated to English by John Mason Neale (also translator of "All Glory, Laud, and Honor", among others) in 1851, beginning "Of the Father sole begotten..."
- Neale's version was heavily revised by Henry Williams Baker for *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861

Tune: Anonymous, c. 950

- Manuscripts from the 10th century point to the tune's origins as a plainchant used for the "Sanctus" portion of

the Catholic mass

- Later tropes (chant alterations and additions) were set to the Latin text “Divinum Mysterium”
 - The first printed copy is a metrical version provided in 1582 by Theodoricus Petri, who sought to preserve the medieval carols of his native Finland
 - Thomas Helmore (adapter of VENI EMMANUEL used with “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”, also by Neale) used DIVINUM MYSTERIUM for the first publication of Neale’s translation; the two have been inseparable
1. We noted the relationship between Christmas and the resurrection in “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen” and “We Three Kings”; this hymn explores the relationship between Christmas and creation. Incidentally, the final four verses of Wesley’s original text for “Hark the Herald” also makes this connection. Comparing the two, what similarities and differences do you find? Do these hymns add anything new to your understanding or perception of Christmas?
- a. Wesley’s text is still heavily focused on Christ, and Christ as redeemer
 - i. “Bruise in us the Serpent’s head”
 - ii. Note the chiasmus in verse 8: “Thine to Ours, and Ours to Thine”
 - iii. Creation as metaphor: Adam and Eve become Jesus and Mary?
 - iv. Christ the creator later comes to redeem nature: “Ruin’d Nature now restore”
 - b. Prudentius’ text is unabashedly creedal
 - i. Recall similarities to “O Come All Ye Faithful”: “true God of true God” ... “begotten, not created”
 - ii. The Council of Nicaea met in 325, not long before Prudentius lived
 - c. Both texts acknowledge:
 - i. Advent — “Desire of Nations” / “the long expected”
 - ii. Rejoicing nature — “Universal Nature say...” / “let creation praise its Lord”
 - iii. Virgin Mary — “Virgin’s womb ... Woman’s Conqu’ring Seed” / “a virgin, filled with grace”
 - iv. The final verse to “Of the Father’s Love” pays tribute to its roots in the “Sanctus” text:
 - Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts.
 - Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
 - Hosanna in the highest.
 - Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
 - Hosanna in the highest.