

## **‘Carols – Wow! Who Knew? (Annual Christmas Lunch Talk)**

A ten-year-old girl went with a group of family and friends to see the Christmas light displays at various locations throughout the city. At one display, they stopped and got out to look more closely at a magnificent nativity scene. “Isn’t that beautiful?” said the little girl’s grandmother. “Look at all the animals, Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus.” “Yes, Grandma,” replied the granddaughter. “It is really very nice. But there is only one thing that bothers me. Isn’t baby Jesus ever going to grow up... he’s the same size he was last year.”

Charles Dickens said ... ‘It is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when Christianity’s mighty Founder was a child Himself.’

Stuart Briscoe said it this way ..... “The spirit of Christmas needs to be superseded by the Spirit of Christ. The spirit of Christmas is annual; the Spirit of Christ is eternal. The spirit of Christmas is sentimental; the Spirit of Christ is supernatural. The spirit of Christmas is a human product; the Spirit of Christ is a divine person. And that makes all the difference in the world.”

Then again, Richard Blackaby put it in these words ..... “On the first Christmas, God didn’t merely send humanity a principle or a doctrine or an ethical system. He sent His only Son. It’s personal.”

But then my favourite human author John, the disciple Jesus loved said it best ..... ‘For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (And because I’m a tragic when it comes to context – the next very next verse says) <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

..... and then in the first chapter of his written work ..... ‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.’

I guess that’s the difference that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit makes to a good quote.

I love a good quote, particularly from a gifted communicator and satirists for me have to be gifted. See if you can hear why I’m a fan and have a copy of the complete works of the following guy. In one of his many Christmas quotes he says ....

‘It is my heart-warmed and world-embracing Christmas hope and aspiration, that all of us, the high, the low, the rich, the poor, the admired, the despised, the loved, the hated, the civilized, the savage (every man and brother of us all throughout the whole earth), may eventually be gathered together in a heaven like place of everlasting rest and peace and bliss ..... all of us, except the inventor of the telephone.’

Yes, you guessed it, Samuel Clemens (aka Mark Twain) ...

I am a huge fan of quality writing and a good story. If I have to read something other than the Bible, I will choose to read another biography or autobiographical work, because for me, truth is so much more fun and interesting than fiction. It is true that even in the quest for a good movie to watch or a TV series to binge, Karen and I will choose a director’s attempt to cinematically interpret a true story or a truth inspired story over just about anything else.

So, today, in light of the hard work we’ve been putting in as a body of faithful believers lately, this being our Christmas party and the beginning of the week each year when we prepare the Christmas presentation gift for our neighbourhood, I thought I’d tell a little of the story behind some of the carols we sing.

There is lots of guess work when it comes to Carols’ stories, we do however, know a fair bit of interesting detail and over the past week or so I have sifted through the most consistent research I’ve been able to uncover about some of our favourite carols.

To start with today though, I thought I’d square away the debate about the music that gets used for classic hymns of faith, like traditional carols. There are some myths and legends, and a couple in particular about the music that Martin Luther and the Wesley Family used. Were they or weren’t they popular tunes that would be sung in taverns around town.

Well, the answer is, surprise - surprise, to quote Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘yes .... and ... a resounding no’. In fact, both sides of the debate have been debunked over time. I have read compelling research articles from people who will defend the originality of revered traditional church music AND I have read just as many articles about how much popular music was actually used, to set the lyrics of church doctrine to.

Disappointingly, in the end, all the articles presented depended upon which platform the debunker stood on and which truth they wanted us to believe.

The fact is it was ... AND, not either or. During earlier centuries and forward from Luther's time, when the institution of the church had greater influence over all aspects of art and creativity, it was more likely that church music influenced the direction and formation of other forms of popular or what we refer to as Pop music.

The Wesley's on the other hand were positioned in a time of the industrial revolution (generally speaking 1740-1860) and the church's transition away from that position of societal influence, a time when the church needed to re-engage with people beyond the gentry, and with Carols in particular, the lyrics were often set to popular tunes, like the one written by William Dix towards the end of the Industrial Revolution, 'What Child is This?' which was eventually set to the English Folk Tune Greensleeves. And then there were tunes that composers wrote that had no home, and these were sometimes used for a Carol and then became famous as multi use tunes for a number of different popular songs and versions of songs, like 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' for example.

Interestingly enough, the debunkers of the 'Charles Wesley used pub songs myth' would site as the main reason, that there was no evidence the song writers were trying to write Christian doctrinal lyrics to existing pop songs with a strategic desire to reach the populous in a way that traditional church music wasn't, and yet, when asked, the Wesley's were quoted as having made it clear, that they were keen to make it easier for the everyday citizen to be able to hear important theological and biblical ideas set to rhymes and metres (or what we would call 'hooks' today) that were familiar to them, and more likely to stick in their minds. It was thought that the added emotion brought by familiarity, might move these ideas to their hearts. Well, if you are tuned in, you might here some of the much-maligned evidence as I share today. So ..... you decide.

Here's our first TWO Carols .....

"**O Come, All Ye Faithful**" (originally written in Latin as "**Adeste Fideles**") is a traditional Christmas Carol that has been attributed to various authors, including (most cited) John Francis Wade (1711–1786), A British Exile living in France after fleeing the Jacobean rebellion, he produced the earliest printed version of the song manuscript in a book published in 1751.

The original four verses were written in Latin, and this was extended to a total of eight verses, and have been translated into many languages.

The English translation of "O Come, All Ye Faithful" by the English Catholic priest Frederick Oakeley, written in 1841, is widespread in most English-speaking countries. There are conflicting theories about whether Wade wrote the original text of "Adeste Fideles" himself or took the words from an anonymous Latin Hymn, written by Cistercian monks, possibly as early as the 13th century.

Now, some trivial facts ....

- ✓ "O Come All Ye Faithful" is reputed to be the favourite Christmas carol of President Eisenhower and in its original form of "Adeste Fideles," of President Jefferson.
- ✓ And just in case you were wondering, yes, the renowned "Why Are We Waiting," chant which is generally sung by a frustrated gathering of people waiting for somebody to turn up, is sung to the tune of "O Come All Ye Faithful."
- ✓ Apart from Mariah Carey's recording of this carol on her second Christmas album, featuring the singer's mother, opera singer Patricia Carey, another popular modern version is by Josh Groban, who recorded the song with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.
- ✓ In 1960, Bing Crosby released one of ONLY two versions of this song to actually chart around the world in which a verse or more were sung in Latin. Bing sang the first verse in Latin.
- ✓ Do you know who sang the other mixed Latin and English version on his 2009 Christmas in the Heart album? Bob Dylan....
- ✓ Dee Snider of Twisted Sister claims that the group's smash hit "We're not Gonna Take it" is based on the melody to this song. To prove his point, Twisted Sister did a version of "O Come All Ye Faithful" set to the music of 'We're Not Gonna Take It' on their 2006 album 'A Twisted Christmas'.

More importantly, O Come All Ye Faithful has a strong biblical lyric. The first verse is based on Luke 2:8-20. In this passage, an angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds in a field, proclaiming to them "good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Lk 2:10). This good news was the birth of "a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord;" and this birth occurred in "the city of David," otherwise known as Bethlehem. This certainly was amazing news and a great cause for joy.

Like many hymns, this hymn contains a refrain that is sung after each verse. This refrain is a worshipful response to the truths contained in the verses: Let us adore Christ! This is what the shepherds did when they returned to their fields “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (Lk 2:20).

Verse 2 of this carol aligns the Luke 2 narrative in a way that acknowledges the full worth of Jesus Christ to receive glory, just as Revelation 5:12 says: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing” and again in Revelation 5:13 we see Christ receiving the same worship as the Father: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!”

Verse 3 which we didn’t sing today but probably will next Sunday night, is based not directly upon scripture, but upon the Nicene Creed. This creed is a historic Christian document dating to the year 325 and the revised version to the year 381. It was written to form a common and unified expression of true Christian doctrine. The Creed, like the carol itself is *based* on scripture, and this traditional 3<sup>rd</sup> verse describes the full deity of Christ and His identical substance and nature with the Father, whilst yet being humbly born as human AND saviour.

The Verse 3 that we did sing today (usually verse 4), alludes to John’s gospel and tells us that Christ is the Word. This truly amazing truth appears in a majority of traditional carol lyrics in one form or another. Why don’t we take a moment now to think about the magnitude of that statement! The Almighty Son willingly robed Himself in human flesh. Is there greater humility than this? And yet it reveals to us how great and worthy of praise this child, Jesus Christ, truly was! O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

### **Hark the Herald Angels Sing**

Many of the carols we sing have a rich theological tradition, and “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!” is one of the most notable. It was written by Charles Wesley, the brother of John and an English Methodist leader and hymn writer himself, writing over 8,700 hymns, over 6500 of which were published – Alex, we have work to do.

As mentioned, and from his own lips, His goal in writing hymns was to teach the poor and illiterate sound doctrine. **John often remarked that Charles’ hymnal was the best theological addendum to the Bible in existence.** Some have noted that Methodism was born in song and Charles was the chief songwriter.

Wesley, inspired by the sounds of London church bells while walking to church on Christmas Day, wrote the “Hark” poem about a year after his conversion so it could be read out loud on Christmas Day. The poem first appeared in Hymns and Sacred Poems in 1739 and Charles had no idea it would become famous. In 1753, George Whitefield, a student of, and eventual colleague of the Wesley’s, adapted the poem into the song we know today. It was Whitefield who penned the phrase, ‘Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king”

For the first 120 years, the words were sung to various tunes. But that changed in 1856 when William Cummings joined the lyrics with a tune written by Felix Mendelssohn for the Gutenberg Festival in 1840 to celebrate the introduction of printing. Mendelssohn would be surprised by that because he had written that his tune would be welcomed by singers and hearers, “but it will never work with sacred words.”

In the classic humour of our God, Hark the Herald arguably espouses the richest and most consistent theology of any carol. While this song brings to mind the declaration of the angelic host, the core teaching of the song is the huge biblical idea of the incarnation – Emmanuel / God with us, Word became flesh and so on. The Wesley’s also espoused the Pauline theology that without the incarnation, there is, and can be no resurrection! So, a big deal indeed.

For me though, two of the stand out phrases in the Carol are firstly .. “Mild He lays His glory by”. I am inspired and challenged every day at Christ’s willingness to lay aside the glory of heaven to take on human nature and become one of us. This is a life changer for me and has probably been at the centre of my spiritual formation these last couple of decades and secondly, “Late in time behold him come” reminds me of Hebrews 1:2 where we are told “in these last days” God has spoken to us through his Son. Whilst recording the ‘Better Now’ album, I was reflecting upon this Christo-centric theology when writing ‘Your Kingdom’. In the bridge section of the song I wrote, ‘Let Your Kingdom Come, Let Your will be done, Let God’s final word, be His only Son’. It is the core of my belief that we function more effectively as a church, if we check everything we are doing and align it to heaven and the life and ministry of Jesus ON the earth.

**“God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen”** is one of the oldest existing Christmas carols. Yep, you heard me correctly. Dated back to the 1500s and probably earlier, this English carol has actually gone through a lot of change, but even more misinterpretation over the years.

The song was written as a reaction to 15th century church music, which was typically dark, sombre, and ..... well ..... in Latin.

Popular editorials of the time claim that most church-goers disliked their religious songs. Because at this time, the people could not change the way they worshipped, they came up with their own music **outside of the church**. This carol became one of the most well-loved of the time and over the next 200 or so years, “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” became a standard in Christmas church music.

Even though written centuries ago, the first printed version didn’t appear until about 1760 – and the influence and proliferation of carols and manuscripts in the time of the Wesley’s can’t be underestimated here. Check out the original words and punctuation for the first verse:

God rest you merry, Gentlemen,  
Let nothing you dismay,  
For Jesus Christ our Saviour  
Was born upon this Day.  
To save poor souls from Satan’s power,  
Which long time had gone astray.  
Which brings tidings of comfort and joy.

Typical of 17th-century language, “rest” in this usage means “to keep or continue being” while “merry”, contrary to many editorials has never meant “great, mighty, or strong” in any English derivation. It does and has meant ‘relaxed or joyful’ (amongst other things) which, if you read the context of the first two lines of the Carol makes a lot of sense. See, context is important whether in the Bible or any other written work. So, a modernized translation of the first lines could read: “God keep you joyful and relaxed, gentlemen, let nothing alarm you to the point of distress or anxiety”.

Looking more closely at the context, the entrance of Jesus into the world brought Joy and Hope right? so this fits with the meaning I’m suggesting.

For the musicologists amongst us, although there is a second tune known as 'Cornish', in print by 1833 and referred to as “the usual version” in the 1928 Oxford Book of Carols, this version is seldom heard today. The better-known traditional English melody is in the minor mode, and wait for it, the earliest printed edition of the melody appears to be in a ‘rondo’ arrangement (every song has a pattern e.g. section A then B then occasionally C and so on. Rondo

indicates the way a song repeats or loops these sections). The arrangement was for pianoforte and it's by Samuel Wesley, son of Charles.

It is interesting and worth noting that 'God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen' is one of the MOST recorded Carols, and has been covered by various music artists. It has charted higher than # 50 in ALL of the following music genres – country, jazz, contemporary Christian, core metal, grunge rock, accapella ..... and it charted highly as part of the score in the 2018 animated version of The Grinch (understandably when you know it was famously used by Charles Dickens in his 1843 novella, 'A Christmas Carol'). It was also used in George Eliot's 1861 novel 'Silas Marner', and I kept this for last. It charted for the first time in the top 10 when it was recorded during the 2010 season of the US hit TV series, Glee.

Biblically and theologically, the carol draws from a lot of scripture, but the various versions mostly editorialize the story of Christ rather than draw specifically from it. References to Mary kneeling and praying to Jesus after giving birth are unlikely but understandable when you regard her reverence and submission, but, my favourite summary embellishment, comes from a verse we don't sing much if at all. It says that after rejoicing upon hearing the words of the angel, they "left their flocks a-feeding in tempest, storm, and wind." Verses 15 and 16 in Luke 2 are much more straightforward and don't really comment about the weather. It is however quite fun to think about the angels singing "Glory to God in the highest" whilst enduring a raging storm.

We particularly like what Meredith Andrews and Jason Ingram added to this carol. You will note that today (and most years recently), we sing their hybrid version 'God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen – He has Come for Us'. Meredith was interviewed about it recently and here's a few snippets.

'I remember saying to my co-writer and producer Jason Ingram that I've always wanted to cover "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" but write my own chorus. There's something about that song, both the words and melody. (For me) It portrays a sort of urgency and the darkness we were in before Christ came for us. Our souls are now at peace because God sent His Son. Jason and I were thinking about how to proclaim that Jesus came to us from His place of glory to this filthy wasteland that we call Earth, full of people Jesus knew would reject Him. Our Lord and Saviour came to a stable and was in a feeding trough. That blows my mind every time I think of it. The chorus and bridge came to us in about thirty minutes after we talked about what we wanted to say, "He has come for us, this Jesus, He's the Hope for all mankind." It's a simple chorus, but it says a lot about the meaning of Christmas. I love singing it. It is based upon



Isaiah 9:6 ..... “For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” combined with the Glory to God in the Highest narrative when the angel of the Lord came to announced good news to the lowly shepherds. That’s the Gospel, that Jesus stepped out of His glory to come and reach out to us, no matter our past, or shortcomings, Jesus came for us. As a little girl I used to get excited about the gifts and Santa, but truly, I always felt an emptiness driving home from my grandmother’s house. As I’ve gotten older, the Lord has shown me the wealth that we have. Our true and free gift from God is Jesus.’

### **What Child is This?**

At the time of creating this hymn, its writer, William Dix, served as an insurance company manager and had been struck by a critical illness. While recovering, he experienced a spiritual revival that led him to write several hymns, including the lyrics to "What Child is This?". The lyric was subsequently set to the tune of "Greensleeves", a traditional and world-renowned English folk song. Although it was formulated in Great Britain, the hymn is more popular in the United States than in its country of origin today.

The lyrics were a poem written by Dix called "The Manger Throne". The part of the poem that was utilized as the song's lyrics consists of three stanzas in total. The first verse poses a rhetorical question in the first half, with the response coming in the second half. The second verse contains another question that is answered, while the final verse is a universal appeal to everyone, urging them "to accept Christ."

The core biblical inspiration for Dix’s poem, and particularly due to the revival he experienced, are the most utilized birth narrative scriptures.

Isaiah 9’s ‘For unto us a child’, Luke 2 and the detail about the birth and its announcement to the world, and Matthew chapter 1, where the writer prophetically explores the life and actions of Mary and Joseph leading up to the birth of Jesus. Dix uses John 1’s powerful heaven to earth description of the Christ, the ‘living word become flesh’, as a way to glue it all together.

### **Finally, today, O Little Town of Bethlehem**

Not sung as frequently today, this is still undoubtedly one of the best-known hymns of the Christmas season and probably my favourite.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem," originated in 1868 as a poem written for the Sunday School of the Church of the Holy Trinity on Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square, by much loved episcopal priest, Rector Phillips Brooks (1835-93), about 3 years after his return from a trip to the Holy Land.

A dynamic preacher, while still in his twenties Brooks rose in prominence as he preached forcefully against slavery during the Civil War, extended his ministry to African American Troops in nearby training camps, advocated equal rights for freedmen, and became active in the Union League. At the end of four years of war, Brooks movingly eulogized Abraham Lincoln and the soldiers who gave their lives. The fallen included his brother George, who died of typhoid while serving in the Union Army.

The carol is popular on both sides of the Atlantic, but to different tunes: in North America where it was written, it was and is to this day (the tune we used today), sung to a tune without a song to call home, known as "St. Louis" composed by Brooks' collaborator and Holy Trinity organist, Lewis Redner.

Redner recounted the story of his composition:

'As Christmas of 1868 approached, Mr. Brooks told me that he had written a simple little carol for the Christmas Sunday-school service, and he asked me to write the tune to it. The simple music was already written but I shaped it for purpose in great haste and under great pressure. We were to practice it on the following Sunday. Mr. Brooks came to me on Friday, and said, "Redner, have you ground out that music yet to 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'?" I replied, "No", but that he should have it by Sunday. On the Saturday night previous, my brain was all confused about the tune. I thought more about my Sunday-school lesson than I did about the music. But I was roused from sleep late in the night hearing an angel-strain whispering in my ear and seizing a piece of music paper I jotted down the treble of the tune as we now have it, and on Sunday morning before going to church I filled in the harmony.

Neither Mr. Brooks nor I ever thought the carol or the music to it would live beyond that Christmas of 1868. My recollection is that Richard McCauley, who then had a bookstore on Chestnut Street west of Thirteenth Street, printed it on leaflets for sale. Rev Dr Huntington, rector of All Saints' Church, Worcester, Massachusetts, asked permission to print it in his Sunday-school hymn and tune book, called 'The Church Porch', and it was he who christened the music as "Saint Louis".'

In the United Kingdom and across the Commonwealth and sometimes in the US at the time, the English hymn tune "Forest Green" is used instead of 'St Louis'. "Forest Green" was adapted by Ralph Vaughan Williams from an English folk ballad called "The Ploughboy's Dream" which he had collected from a Mr. Garman of Forest Green, Surrey, in 1903. You might know the tune if I can get it right.

Even though Brooks was inspired by personal testimony, after both the Civil War and his time spent visiting Bethlehem on Christmas Eve in 1865, what he wondrously does in the lyric of this carol, is he explores THREE locations like they are the same one (no prizes for those who guess why I like it) and uses TWO key scriptures to do it. The prophecy in Micah chapter 5, which he connects and aligns to Matthew 2: 1-12 where the Magi encounter Herod and his Chief Priests, who confirm where the messiah will be born, quoting the prophet.

And this is the God of history, the God of redemptive history; this is the God who had made a promise in Genesis 3:15 that from the seed of the woman one would be born, one of the house and lineage of David, bringing together Ruth and Boaz in order to fulfill that promise in an insignificant little town called Bethlehem. God would raise up a King; God would raise up a Shepherd; God would raise up His fulfillment to His covenant promise: Bethlehem

But when Brooks writes 'how still we see thee lie and deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars etc. he's probably visualizing the Bethlehem that he visited and that Micah the prophet was referring to as small and somewhat insignificant, and not the bustling Bethlehem at the time of the census. In the second verse though, Brooks does something remarkable.

In the Scripture account, it is the shepherds who are keeping watch over their flocks by night; but Brooks is meditating on the shepherds in the fields on that Christmas Eve in the Middle East in 1865, and he thinks to himself, there are others also who are watching. Angels and archangels, and cherubim and seraphim; Michael and Gabriel; and they are watching with a love that is full of wonder, full of gasps of astonishment as they behold the unfolding of the mystery of God's plan of redemption.

And this is where the carol moves to the third-in-one location .....

'our hearts'. The lyric goes, "O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today."

You know, it's one thing to sentimentalize the story of Bethlehem, and it lends itself to that. It's yet another thing simply to see the objective reality of the incarnation of the Son of God, the enfleshment of the second person of the Trinity. But, the real point of Christmas and the real point of the incarnation is that He has come to save us, to regenerate us, and bring us into union and fellowship with the now-risen Christ who sits enthroned at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

And the question this carol is asking of us— the prayer, in fact, that it makes—is that Jesus might not only be One who is “out there” or even “up there”, but is He IN HERE, is He in my heart, dwelling by His Spirit, having brought me out of darkness and into light; having rescued me, and washed and cleansed me, He justified me; adopted me into His household and family; and has given to me AND us the very seed of promise that assures us that having begun a good work, He will complete it on the day of Jesus Christ.

Christmas Carols ..... Wow! Who knew? There's more to it than meets the eye and ear.