

A SHORT HISTORY OF JOY

Joy may be briefly defined as “gladness of heart”. Jesus, in his parables, compares the joy that ordinary humans might feel in finding a lost sheep or a lost coin with the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:1-10). In Psalms 16, which is ascribed to King David, the Psalmist maintains that the Lord is “the portion of my inheritance”, and in Him the Psalmist dwells securely. He concludes: “Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; / In Thy presence is fullness of joy; / In Thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11).

The Psalmist here contrast his own devotion to God, whom he describes as “the portion of his inheritance” with the wicked “whose portion is in this life” alone. So, although the scriptures refer to many kinds of joy, the distinction sometimes made between the joy of a spiritual or righteous person and of people in general is that the joy of a godly person may be described as “full” or “complete”.

Throughout the Psalms, right relationship with God and being found blameless in His sight are of surpassing importance, and lead ultimately to this “fullness of joy”. We are frequently invited to emulate this proximity to God, and to join the crowds of joyful worshippers at the Temple.

Besides God Himself and His divine nature, what are some sources of this joy? Foremost is the lively appreciation of what God has done for Israel in the past, and is likely to do in the future. This usually involves God breaking into history, in some sense, and delivering his people. God’s rescue of the Hebrews from their slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh is a frequently repeated example. However, after having settled in Palestine, the Israelites appear to be in almost constant need of deliverance from their enemies round about them.

An example of this occurred in the reign of King Ahaz of Judah, when Rezin the king of Aram in Syria, and Pekah, the son of the King of Israel, attacked Jerusalem together. The Lord sent the prophet Isaiah and his son (whose name translates as “A Remnant Shall Remain”) to speak to the King of Judah. Unfortunately, King Ahaz was either too frightened or too focused on military help to look to God for assistance. So, Isaiah proclaimed that God would give him a sign of what would happen, namely, “A young woman will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name ‘Immanuel’,” which means “God is with us” (Is. 7:14). Before this boy is fully grown, the enemies of Judah will be scattered, says Isaiah. We don’t hear anything more about this boy “Immanuel” or his mother for over 700 years, when Matthew’s Gospel cites this passage in connection with the birth of Jesus.

The general meaning of this passage may be that people don’t usually have children when their circumstances are completely hopeless. In fact, Isaiah the prophet and his wife also have a child at this time. As with many prophets, there is good news and bad news. Judah’s enemies, Aram and Israel, will be destroyed by the Assyrians very soon. Judah itself will eventually

become subject to the Assyrians, but Judah and Jerusalem will not be completely destroyed. As the name of Isaiah's first child implies, "A Remnant Shall Remain".

Here then we have the significant connection between God intervening to save his people, in spite of their sins, and the birth of a child. Both of these events are joyful in themselves, but together they are doubly causes for joy.

In Luke's account of the Nativity, we have all these elements and more. First, the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are promised that they will give birth to a child, even though they are past the usual child-bearing age. Then a virgin, named Mary, is promised that she will give birth to a son, who will be born through the agency of the Holy Spirit. These events will be part of God's greatest ever intervention in history, as part of his once-for-all plan to provide salvation for all people.

Luke's account of the Nativity quickly became a beloved part of the Christian tradition, but not without controversy. Chief among the religious opponents of early Christianity were the Gnostics, who believed that Jesus was a divine spirit who never truly became a human being. The Apostle John attacks this doctrine saying that there were "men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2 John: 7). Not surprisingly, the Gnostics denied the validity of Luke's Nativity narrative. This provoked the anger and sarcasm of Tertullian, one of the early Church Fathers who parodied Gnostic doctrines. "Away", they say, "with that eternal plaguey taxing of Caesar, and the scanty inn, and the squalid swaddling clothes, and the hard stable. We do not care a jot for that multitude of the heavenly host which praised their Lord at night. Let the shepherds take better care of their flock, and let the wise men spare their legs so long a journey..." We also find a surprising large collection of eastern poems and hymns, mostly in Greek, which celebrate the Nativity in a very modern manner, mostly referring to the elements of the birth of Jesus which Tertullian defended.

A recent article from the Reader's Digest group, suggests that the earliest Christmas poems and hymns still sung today in the West come from the Latin Church after the Roman Empire became Christian in the early 4th Century. As Annie pointed out to me recently, we actually sang a version of Prudentius's poem "Of the Father's Love Begotten..." here at Grace about a month ago. This might be a good occasion to pause and comment on the tortuous route whereby early Greek and Latin poems became modern hymns and carols. This also suggests why relatively few early Christian poems grace the modern hymnbook.

First, many ancient hymns were originally written without the accompanying music. Even if they did have a musical accompaniment, the ancient notation systems did not fully indicate the vocal and instrumental presentation involved. (Isidore of Seville in the 6th Century A.D. tried to standardize musical accompaniments, but they still had a long way to go.) It wasn't

until the 1600s that a system of notation, similar to that of our modern hymnbooks, became widely accepted.

Using the example of Prudentius's Latin poem, written around 400 A.D., we can follow the route whereby it reached the modern hymnbook. First of all, as Greek and Latin ceased to be the vernacular speech of ordinary people, these songs had to be translated by scholars. They also had to be put to music appropriate to the song, yet singable by the congregation. This was partly resolved when a collection of mediaeval carols and tunes were first brought to England in the 1850s, and offered to the Rev. John M. Neale, a High Anglican clergyman. Neale had long been working on translating ancient texts, but now he had the appropriate tunes to set them to. This collection of tunes, named *Piae Cantiones*, had been first published in Scandinavia in 1582, but was little known hitherto outside of Sweden and Finland. So, Neale translated Prudentius's poem into English, and set it to a tune from *Piae Cantiones*. This tune happened to be "plainsong", that is, a chant from the Middle Ages.

To show how difficult, even dangerous, this process might be, Neale's interest in ancient texts, gained him the reputation of being a Roman Catholic sympathizer, and, on one occasion, he was attacked and beaten up by a mob.

One feature in the development of the English hymnbook in the 19th century is the very large role played by Oxford University and the Anglican Church. Since most Anglican clergy were educated at Oxford, they carried this enthusiasm for reviving ancient hymns and mediaeval carols wherever they served. (But you don't have to mention this fact to members of the Good Shepherd congregation.)

Another very old difficulty which has affected musical innovation was that the conservative tradition favoured hymns which were actually scriptural paraphrases, that is, they were hymns which followed the actual words of the Bible as closely as possible. Most common among those songs for use in church were the Psalms, which were put into metrical, or verse form, and sung as hymns. An example of this type would be Nahum Tate's "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night" which is simply Luke's account of the first Christmas Eve put into verse. Tate and his associate Brady had provided a complete metrical version of the Psalms in 1696 for use in churches. Four years later, "While Shepherds Watched" was included as a supplement to the Psalm collection.

One very important figure in loosening the restrictions on hymn writing was Isaac Watts. Watts was a Dissenter, which means that he was not a member of the state church; in other words, he was not an Anglican. This resulted in some personal restrictions of a social, political, and economic nature. Dissenters, for example, received no support or patronage from the government or the religious establishment, and usually worked for private patrons and independent churches. Like others, Watts' hymns were usually scripturally based, but they were

not close paraphrases. Watts believed that hymns, like other lyrics, should soar upwards, rather than follow a cautious tradition. Besides taking a freer approach to the use of scripture, Watts further believed that it was legitimate to omit the common references in the Psalms to cutting up enemies, or calling on God to smite the ungodly. In effect, he “Christianized” the Old Testament scriptures which his hymns were often based on. This naturally resulted in a pushback from more conservative circles which accused Watts of being a heretic.

Less than a generation after Isaac Watts, the German composer George Frederick Handel arrived in England and provided music which allowed hymns and choral music to soar, much in the way that Watts had opened up the possibility of using more lyrical texts for church music. Particularly with his famous “Messiah”, Handel demonstrated how Biblical texts could be set to inspiring and uplifting music. Handel had many imitators in the English-speaking world and it was an American composer Lowell Mason who provided a new tune for Watts’ well-known hymn, “Joy to the World”.

To appreciate the transformation which Watts and Handel made in church music, I will read the psalm text which “Joy to the World” is loosely based on. Psalm 98 is itself a very inspiring text, proclaiming the future establishment of God’s kingship on the earth. It concludes with the message that the Lord comes to judge the earth, and to rule the world with righteousness. Here is Psalm 98.

“O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things!
His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him the victory.
The Lord has made known his victory,
He has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.
Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
Break forth into joyous song and sing praises!
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
With the lyre and the sound of melody!
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
Make a joyful noise before the Lord, our King.
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
The world and those who dwell in it!
Let the floods clap their hands;
Let the hills sing for joy together!
Before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

As we proceed to sing Isaac Watts’ hymn “Joy to the World”, we can appreciate how Watts’ frees the text from its original context and Christianizes it into a celebration of the birth of Jesus. Now the Grace singers will lead us in singing together “Joy to the World”.

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let Earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the world! the Saviour reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

Another poem by Watts which became a Christmas hymn was somewhat unintentionally brought to notice. The poet presumably wrote it for friends or patrons who had a new baby in the family. He compares the loving care this young arrival receives with the less favourable circumstances of our Saviour's birth. Watts apparently never intended to publish this poem, but it was circulated in manuscript, and he was encouraged to publish it by friends. Watts was also one of the first religious poets to write a collection of poems and hymns primarily for children. The version of "The Cradle Hymn" which is sung today includes only three of Watts' original seven stanzas. I am grateful to Annie and the choir for presenting it today.

Cradle Hymn

Hush, my babe, lie still and slumber,
Holy angels guard thy bed.
Heav'nly blessings without number,
Gently falling on thy head.
How much better thou'rt attended,
Than the Son of God could be;

When from heaven He descended,
And became a child like thee.

Soft and easy is thy cradle,
Coarse and hard thy Saviour lay:
When His birthplace was a stable
And his softest bed was hay.
Oh, to tell the wondrous story,
How his foes abused their King;
How they killed the Lord of glory,
Makes me angry while I sing.

Hush, my child, I did not chide thee,
Though my song may seem so hard:
'Tis thy mother sits beside thee,
And her arms shall be thy guard,
May'st thou learn to know and fear Him,
Love and serve Him all thy days;
Then to dwell forever near Him,
Tell his love and sing His praise.

Many famous hymns and carols have been written for a special occasion—sometimes because there were no appropriate words readily available. A French wine merchant and poet named Placide Cappeau was asked to write a lyric for the rededication of a parish church in 1843 by the local priest. Cappeau was politically inclined, and widely referred to as a socialist, even an atheist. He had an indirect connection with the composer Adolphe Adam, who was best known for writing ballet music, and other secular compositions. Because of the reputations of the poet and composer, opposition to the song began to emerge among the clergy and religious writers. Its popularity among the common people was also a source of distaste. Adam's rousing tune was also considered likely to provoke revolutionary stirrings among the masses.

Not long afterwards, it was translated into English by John Sullivan Dwight who was a leading abolitionist. The phrase, "Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother", became a rallying cry for abolitionists in the northern States, and anathema to slave-owners in the South. For a long time, it was not widely sung in churches. I have suggested to Annie that we might recapture more of the spirit of the song by having the whole congregation sing it, rather than a soloist.

O Holy Night!

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth;
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn;

Fall on your knees, Oh, hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine!

Led by the light of faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand;
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
Here came the wise men from Orient land.
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,
In all our trials born to be our Friend;
He knows our need, To our weakness is no stranger.
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend!
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend!

Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace;
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,
And in His name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise His holy name;
Christ is the Lord, Oh, praise His name forever!
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim.

Our final example of somewhat unlikely Christmas carols also comes from the era of the American Civil War. America's leading poet of that time was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who, on Christmas Day 1863, was feeling the personal trauma of several tragedies, along with the horror of the War itself. His cherished wife had died in a house fire two years earlier, and his oldest son had just left home to join the Union Army without telling his father. Quite a mixture of thoughts and feelings came together, when Longfellow sat down to write "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day".

I Heard the Bells

I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had roll'd along th'unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

Till, ringing, swinging on its way,

The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound, the carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn the households born
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead; nor doth He sleep!
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men.”

AND ALL THE PEOPLE SAID “AMEN”