



Glad Tidings

by Paul R. Otte

Introduction

'Christmas is my favourite time of the year.'

Many people resonate with this statement, but for different reasons. For some, the reason may be precious...families sharing a spirit of togetherness unequalled at any other time...thinking of friends and relatives as we shop for that special gift that expresses our love...or it could be the decorations and carols proving that the message of Christmas is so grand, that nothing in life will be considered ordinary for these special days in December. For Christians, Christmas is wonderful because it recalls the day when God stepped into this lost world to change it forever, to win it back for no other reason than God's divine love that would save his rebellious creation at any cost.

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19).

But there's another reason to delight in this holy season. Though some of us bemoan Christmas as the supreme example of our culture secularising a religious festival, the opposite may well be true! Without Christmas, could you imagine pop singers crooning words in public like 'The Lord is come', 'God and sinners reconciled', and 'Son of God, Love's pure light'? Every time the word 'Christmas' appears, 'Christ' is in it, and that word means 'Saviour'. It is a constant reminder throughout our religious or secular celebrations of the true reason we celebrate at all: Jesus, the Christ, has come! It is his birth about which we sing and rejoice. In fact, on the very night of his birth, some 2000 years ago, the world's first Christmas carol was sung by a chorus of angels sharing the message with shepherds outside a small city in Palestine. Today's carols continue to celebrate and share that message. In them may be found the story, the love, and the beauty of Christmas.

Once in royal David's city – a carol of confession

Every Christmas Eve since 1918, the world famous 'Service of Nine Lessons and Carols' from Kings College, Cambridge, England has begun with the singing of the same Christmas carol. It is a hauntingly beautiful, yet serene and simple carol called 'Once In Royal David's City'. One of the most beloved of English carols, and a favourite of Australians as well.

Like many great works of literature or poetry, its genius can best be understood by meeting its author. Cecil Frances Alexander (1823-95) is a person any of us would have been honoured to know. Born in Dublin, she lived her entire life in Ireland. She had a lifelong passion for the religious education of children. Before her marriage to Anglican clergyman, Rev. William Alexander, she and her sister established a school for the deaf. Throughout her days, she was known for her tireless efforts on behalf of children, the sick, the poor, and young women.

She was a truly remarkable woman who published many books of original religious poetry and hymns. Her most famous was *Hymns for Little Children*, 1848, which included our carol and two well-known hymns: 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', and 'There Is a Green Hill Far Away' (written at the bedside of a sick child). Attesting to the success of this hymnal, forty years later, it was in its 67th edition! About children's hymns, she said, 'a namby-pamby, childish style is most unpleasing to children', and that 'it is surprising how soon they can understand and follow a high order of poetry'.

Just as the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols begins with 'Once in Royal David's City', we have begun our exploration of Christmas carols with this gem, because it is a fine example of Confession (used here to mean a statement of belief). It tells and teaches the story of Christmas, and in singing it, each of us can confess our faith. The story of Christmas is so wonderful that Cecil Alexander begins her carol like a fairy-tale:

*Once in royal David's city
Stood a lowly cattle shed
Where a mother laid her baby
In a manger for his bed;
Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ, her little child.*

One can easily imagine Cecil Alexander bending low to the face of a child and teaching this wondrous story through her poetry. And it truly is a teaching piece, for her hymnal, *Hymns for Little Children*, was organised as an instruction book in Christian teaching. Our carol is intended to illuminate the truth that Jesus was 'born of the virgin Mary'.

We believe that Jesus Christ is truly God as an ancient Creed states, 'God of God', 'who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven'. Alexander writes:

*He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all,
And his shelter was a stable,
And his cradle was a stall;
With the poor and mean and lowly Lived on earth our Saviour holy.*

Jesus became a true human being, that is 'was incarnate (literally: came in a body) by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man'. She writes, in this little-known verse:

*For he is our childhood's pattern:
Day by day, like us, he grew,
He was little, weak and helpless, Tears and smiles like us he knew;*

And he feeleth for our sadness, and he shareth in our gladness.

Few carols of Christmas can stand up as well as this one in setting forth both the story and the beauty of Christmas. The graceful melody by British scholar and composer Henry J. Gauntlett is the perfect match for this lovely carol. Cecil Alexander brings the story into the reality of our lives and adds a burst of excitement in the last two stanzas:

***And our eyes at last shall see him
Through his own redeeming love,
For that child, so dear and gentle Is
our Lord in heaven above;
And he leads his children on
To the place where he is gone.***

***Not in that poor, lowly stable,
With the oxen standing by,
We shall see him; But in heaven,
Set at God's right hand on high. When
like stars his children crowned, All in white, shall wait around.***

From heaven above to earth I come – a riddle carol

*Please take notes with poetry,
A bit of dance, a bit of glee, A
smidgeon of theology.
A famous birth is heard in me. What am I?*

To solve this riddle, unscramble the following letters: 'MACHO TRAIL SCARS'. Just about everybody loves a good riddle, unless of course it's too hard. I hope you got this one. If not, read on and I'll tell you the answer later. One person who must have liked riddles was Martin Luther. When he was a young man, he and other young people would get together at a party and play a popular singing game involving riddles.

Each young man would take his turn singing:

*From distant lands to you I come
And bring good news to everyone
I bring so much you'd like to know Much more than I shall tell you though.*

He would then pose a riddle to one of the young ladies. If she could not solve it, she would have to give him her wreath. Have you solved the riddle, or do I have your wreath? The answer to the riddle posed above is 'A Christmas Carol'. And that is what Luther made out of the party game.

Dr. Luther had the custom of celebrating Christmas Eve with his family by arranging a family program. For one of those programs, he paraphrased the party song to carry the Christmas message. The result is the carol:

*From heaven above to earth I come
To bear good news to every home;
Glad tidings of great joy I bring, Whereof I now will say and sing:*

Follow this stanza with 'Who am I?' and it's a riddle! Luther intentionally leaves out the identity of the singer making you figure out that it is the angel speaking to the shepherds about the birth of the Saviour. The good news about Jesus' birth all becomes clear as the carol continues:

*'To you this night is born a child
Of Mary, chosen virgin mild; This
little child, of lowly birth, Shall be the joy of all the earth.*

When it comes to the message of the birth of Jesus, Luther knows that there can be no riddles, no guesswork. This gospel must be proclaimed with all the clarity and certainty that can be mustered. And yet, with a twinkle in his eye, Dr. Luther scattered more riddles throughout the thirteen stanzas of the carol. The words of an angel to the shepherds (Luke 2:12) are presented as the clues of a riddle:

*'These are the tokens ye shall mark:
The swaddling-clothes and manger dark; There
shall ye find the young child laid,
By whom the heavens and earth were made.'*

Reading through the rest of the carol reveals even more riddles, some answered, some posed as a challenge:

*Give heed, my heart, lift up thine eyes;
Who is it in yon manger lies?
Who is this child, so young and fair?
(answer)
The blessed Christ-child lieth there.*

*Welcome to earth, Thou noble guest,
Through whom the sinful world is blest!
Thou com'st to share my misery; What thanks shall I return to Thee?
(how do I answer?)*

The stanzas are often sung in varying order and by different groups or soloists since some verses portray the angel, the shepherds, and the reaction of God's people to the news of Christmas. However it is sung, it will always be cherished by the Christian Church as a truly fine (and fun!) Christmas carol.

Before we leave this carol, we must say a word about the melody. Scholars think that on that first performance of 'The Riddle Carol' (probably in 1534), the traditional folk melody of the party game was used. But Luther liked his carol enough to write a new melody for it a few years later. Luther's melody paints a musical picture of stanza one. It begins 'in heaven

above' by starting at the top of the scale. The last line of the melody makes a downward musical scale to show not only the journey of the angel 'From heaven above to earth' but also to mark the same journey by the Saviour. The melody has been used and therefore honoured by many composers by using it in cantatas and instrumental compositions, especially by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Silent night, holy night – a serene carol

Ask ten people what their favourite Christmas carol is, and many will choose 'Silent Night'. The title itself captures what for many people is the essence of Christmas, a feeling of peace, both earthly and spiritual. The angels who appeared to the shepherds on that wondrous night were the first to proclaim the two reactions to the Christmas message: glory to God and peace to the earth.

When a piece of music comes along and thoroughly captures the spirit of something, a first reaction is often to attribute the great achievement to a great musical achiever. And so it was, that for many years 'Silent Night' was said to have been a German folk melody or that it was written by Mozart, or by Joseph Haydn. But it was not written by any of these musical giants who wrote volumes of music and song. In fact, it was the only hymn written by Joseph Mohr set to the only melody still known by Franz Gruber.

The carol has been spread all over Europe and beyond within twenty years of its writing, along with the incorrect notations about its authorship and composition! It wasn't until 1854 that Franz Gruber wrote a letter to Berlin documenting its true origin.

The peaceful nature of 'Silent Night' is somewhat miraculous. It was written because of a calamity! Joseph Mohr was the parish priest at St. Nikolaus Church in Oberndorf, Austria in 1818 and Franz Gruber was the organist there. Both had prepared themselves for a glorious Christmas celebration. Everything was ready ... everything, except the organ. It gave out on December 24! What could be done? Even though the choirs were well trained and knew their cantatas well, to sing the elaborate Christmas chorales unaccompanied was out of the question.

Joseph needed something new. He hastily wrote a new poem and called upon Franz to write a melody simple enough that it could be accompanied on the guitar. Both knew they wouldn't have time to teach even this simple carol to the choir in time, so they decided to sing the song as a duet with the choir repeating just the last line of each verse. I can imagine the tension of the first performance ... No organ for Christmas! ... A new song for the choir at the last minute! ... Will we get through it? ... Will the people be disappointed? But when midnight came, out of the most penetrating silence there is—the silence just before a nervous musician begins a potentially shaky performance—out of this silence arose the comfort and serenity of 'Silent Night, Holy Night'.

What gives this carol its genius? Perhaps it is because the words are so far removed from prose, that they are nearly pure poetry. No story is told, minimal theology is taught, only images and fragments like so many gentle waves washing over a sandy shore:

*Silent night, holy night, All is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin mother and child.*

*Holy infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

*Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glory streams from heaven afar,
Heavenly hosts sing: Hallelujah!
Christ the Saviour is born,
Christ the Saviour is born.*

*Silent night, holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy Holy face, With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth, Jesus, Lord at Thy birth.*

There's a parable here. In the midst of bad news and panic, God brought about the world's most famous and serene Christmas carol. And in this world of bad news, God can still bring peace of mind to troubled and anxious souls 'with the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord, at Your birth'.

Away in a manger – a mysterious, melodic carol

The only thing about our next carol that is not confusing is its message and the fact that it is clearly for children. Author Albert Edward Bailey writes, 'No trace of an author for this perfect child's hymn has been found nor has the date of its composition been established. It needs no interpretation, for both in thought and imagery it is on the child's level' (*The Gospel in Hymns*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1950).

One reason for the confusion of authorship is that it was first published in Philadelphia in 1887 with the heading, 'Luther's Cradle Hymn' (composed by Martin Luther for his children, and still sung by German mothers to their little ones). This myth persisted for many years. In fact, the carol was unknown before 1885 and until recently, never even appeared in a German translation. It is truly an American carol. One can only speculate that it may have been written in honour of the four hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth, which was celebrated by the large German Lutheran community in Pennsylvania.

There is a telling term in use today that applies primarily to popular music. It is 'songwriter'. Since a song consists of words AND music, a contemporary songwriter is usually responsible for both. Most people in our culture tend to assume that most songs were written by a songwriter, that is, by one person who wrote both words and melody. It comes as a surprise to many that this is a fairly recent development. A more traditional situation is one in which the composer of the music and the author of the text are two different people.

Some argue that creativity and skill in one area or the other is rare enough, and to search for both in one individual is expecting too much. It may well be the better part of wisdom to try

to be a great poet OR a great composer, not both. In opera and in musical comedies a collaboration is the norm, like George (music) and Ira (text) Gershwin, or Rodgers (music) and Hammerstein (text). In hymns and carols, the composer and author may never even have known one another and may even have lived centuries apart.

'Away in a Manger' is a good example of this division of labour. It is such a good example in fact, that several composers have provided melodies for 'Away in a Manger'. It has been sung to so many different tunes, that singers aren't always sure which melody they will hear when it is sung. History has sifted out several which are in common use today. The one most commonly used in Australia was written by Williams James Kirkpatrick (1838-1921). Another melody often heard is by Jonathan E. Spilman (1818-1896) which was composed originally got 'Flow Gently, Sweet Afton'. I suppose everyone has their own favourite.

Whichever melody is used, the carol works its way into the hearts of children and remains there through life. Who can forget the sympathy generated by the line 'Away in a manger, no crib for a bed' and the touching vision of 'the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay'?

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay,
The little Lord Jesus asleep in the hay.*

We love the affection strengthened by singing 'I love thee, Lord Jesus', and the mental picture of the stable made real for animal-loving children by singing 'the cattle are lowing' (even if they don't know what 'lowing' means)?

*The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.
I love Thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky,
And stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.*

Dr. John Thomas McFarland of New York added a third stanza sometime around 1904 at the request of his friend, Methodist Bishop William Anderson. This stanza takes the form of a child's prayer that we would all do well to pray often:

*Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask Thee to stay
Close by me for ever, and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there.*

Angels we have heard on high – anonymous angelic authors

Here we have been exploring several Christmas carols and we never defined our terms! Our next carol gives us a good opportunity to study the word 'carol'. In modern usage, it simply refers to a traditional song on the subject of Christmas. Long ago, however, the term referred more to the type of song it was than to its subject matter.

A carol was a song which alternated stanzas with a refrain which is repeated after each stanza. Except in those days, they didn't call it a 'refrain, they called it a 'burden'! By that definition, hymns like 'Lift High the Cross' would fit the defi.

The carol of which we speak is 'Angels We Have Heard on High'. The 'burden' or refrain is:

Glo—ria in excelsis deo Glo—ria in excelsis deo.

The carol is particularly fun because the stanzas and the burden stand in such contrast. The melody of the stanzas is plain and simple as narration should be. The melody of the burden is florid and elaborate as the song's proclaiming 'Glory to God in the highest' should be. (By the way, that's what 'Gloria in excelsis deo' means.)

The stanzas take on a most interesting form reminiscent of Hebrew poetry which rhymed ideas instead of sounds. The melody of the stanzas is essentially two phrases which are identical, like an echo. And so the first stanza identifies this phenomenon:

***Angels we have heard on high
Sweetly singing o'er the plains
And the mountains in reply Echoing their joyous strains.***

This is the perfect text for this echoing melody. The succeeding stanzas perfectly mimic Hebrew poetry as they consist of two lines in which the second line repeats the thought of the first line with slightly different words:

***Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be Which inspire your heavenly song?***

Stanza three performs the same echo of meaning:

***Come to Bethlehem and see
Him, whose birth the angels sing;
Come, adore on bended knee Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.***

We see the same style (minus the rhyming sounds) in the pairing of phrases in the Psalms, for example, Psalm 67:1-3.

*May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us –
so that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.*

May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you.

I'd like to tell you about the author of 'Angels we have heard on high'. I'd like to but I can't. There are some fanciful legends about its authorship, including one that goes back to the year A.D. 129 involving Bishop Telephorus of Rome. But neither the author of the original French carol nor the author of the English translation is known.

But the authorship of the burden (the refrain) is another matter. 'Who wrote it?', may not be the correct question. Perhaps we should ask, 'What wrote it?', because these words came first not from the pen of any human being, but from the voices of heaven! One of the great joys of Christmas is echoing the song of those wondrous servants of God, the angels, who

played such important roles in announcing to the world the magnificent plan of God, our Saviour's birth. 'Gloria in excelsis Deo!'

Sussex Carol – a carol of excitement

As much as I would like to tell you the exact meaning and derivation of the word 'carol', I cannot. No one knows for sure. It could have come from the Greek 'Kyrie eleison' (or Lord have mercy), or 'chorea', or from late Latin 'caraula'. While the experts may debate this endlessly, the most likely source is the Medieval French word 'carole' which is a name for a circle dance. It can therefore be said with some certainty that a carol is a dancelike song. Now doesn't that sound like fun? And that is what Christmas should be!

Many of the most beloved Christmas carols suggest a rollicking, good time. Whose toes don't start tapping when hearing a quick and cheerful rendition of 'Joy to the World' or 'Deck the halls'? A carol has come to us from the South of England, a region called Sussex, which captures this mood perfectly!

*On Christmas night all Christians sing To
hear the news the angels bring;
On Christmas night all Christians sing To
hear the news the angels bring: News of
great joy, news of great mirth, News of our merciful King's birth.*

The song is correct. What do all Christians do on Christmas Eve? They sing the good news, don't they?! And shouldn't we couch the gospel (the good news) of Jesus Christ in giddy carols characterised by 'great joy' and 'great mirth'? Of course there are those who claim they can't sing. If you cannot sing, then should, yell, jump, and dance! You cannot be silent and sad.

*Then why should we on earth be so sad,
Since our Redeemer made us glad? Then
why should we on earth be so sad, Since
our Redeemer made us glad, When from
our sin he set us free,
All for to gain our liberty?*

*When sin departs before his grace, Then
life and health come in its place; When
sin departs before his grace, Then life
and health come in its place; Heaven
and earth with joy may sing, All for to see the new-born King.*

There's the gospel so pure and simple we can all rejoice in it. This text and the unbelievably lively melody are too good to have come from the pen of one author or one composer. It must have come out of the ages like a folk song does, tossed from one generation to the next, each adding its own touch as it shares in the joy. Musicians call this rhythm a 6/4 time or a 'jig' by various spellings, as in 'to dance a jig'.

To pick a favourite Christmas carol is nearly impossible. Each has a genius of its own and makes its own contribution to the season. But if a 'carol' is a 'dancing tune', then the 'Sussex Carol' best captures the idea.

St. John writes of Jesus, 'In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind... The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world' (John1:4,9). The carol suggests that this news is so great that it 'made' the angels sing of it. May we all sing and rejoice as we are invited to do by the last stanza!

*And so from darkness we have light,
Which made the angels sing this night;
And so from darkness we have light,
Which made the angels sing this night:
'Glory to God and peace descend Now and for evermore, Amen!'*



For more support,
contact Lutheran Media.
www.lutheranmedia.org.au
office@lutheranmedia.org.au
1800 353 350

Find other booklets to help with life's challenges and opportunities at messagesofhope.org.au and leave a comment about this booklet.

Messages of Hope is produced by Lutheran Media.



© Copyright 1996 by Lutheran Hour Ministries
Revised by Lutheran Media 2025

Lutheran Hour Ministries is a Christian outreach ministry supporting churches worldwide in its mission of Bringing Christ to the Nations – and the Nations to the Church.

Reproduced with permission from Lutheran Hour Ministries.

Unless noted otherwise, Scripture is taken from the HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®, Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society, Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.