

Christmas Eve 2007

Singing and music mark this time of year as no other. We sing because we believe. As St Augustine said, “Those who sing, pray twice.” And the hymns of Christmas contain some very good theology about what Christians believe about Jesus Christ. Take for instance the hymn “Hark the herald angels sing” which we sing tonight. It was written by the great 18th Century hymn-writer Charles Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement—who, by the way, died as a priest of the Church of England.

Not all Christmas hymns are as theologically profound as this one. Many of them, like “While shepherds watched their flocks by night,” are a straightforward telling of the Christmas story. Others, like “O come all ye faithful,” are hymns of praise. Wesley’s hymn, however is first and foremost a teaching hymn. So let us learn.

At the outset, we find the line *God and sinners reconciled*, which takes us straight away to Second Corinthians where we read that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself,” a verse which, Wesley contended, was at the heart of the Gospel.

Whatever the world may suppose was the purpose of the Incarnation or Enfleshment of God, as Christians we know that it is, God’s initiative to restore fallen humanity from the state of being estranged and alienated from God to a state of reconciliation and sonship. The Birth of Christ means that it is possible for men and women to become children of God.

But we’re moving a little too fast. How does this reconciliation occur? Wesley writes,

Christ by highest heaven adored

Christ the everlasting Lord.

Unlike you and me, who have a beginning in our conception and birth, Jesus existed from all time. He is “Eternally begotten of the Father,” as the Creed put it. In Jesus we are dealing not only with a man—though he is truly man—but with God himself.

The world directs our attention to Santa Claus, to fir-trees and turkeys—anything to distract people from asking the question, “Who is the Baby?” And who is the Baby?

Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see

*Hail the Incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with us to dwell
Jesus our Emmanuel.
Hail the Son of Righteousness
Light and life to all he brings
Risen with healing in his wings!*

Jesus is the one who fulfills the prophecy of Malachi, who said, “for you who fear my Name, the Son of Righteousness will shine out with healing in his rays.”

In comparing Christ with the sun in the sky, we think immediately of the opening words of John’s Gospel: “In him was light ... the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it.” We can shut out the light by drawing the curtains, we can turn a blind eye to it, but all we do is to insulate ourselves from it. The light is changed not one whit.

*Mild, he lays his glory by
Born that man no more may die.*

Christ “emptied himself,” says St Paul to the Philippians, “so in your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus who though he was God, humbled himself to be born in human form.” It is for this reason that Jesus own people did not accept him. They weren’t prepared for a God that came amongst them in such a humble and material way.

But if you think of it, God always comes to us in material ways: the means of grace are all material in their nature—bread and wine, oil and water, the church building, and the holy people of God can all be touched and handled and seen and experienced. It is outward and visible material means that convey inward and spiritual grace.

God the Son is no phantom, he is flesh and blood as we are, who through material means has made it possible for us to partake of his nature, and merit eternal life.

*Born to raise us from the earth
Born to give us second birth.*

Christmas is not only about the Birth of the Savior, but about the Birth of the Savior in our human flesh. Jesus is God in skin. And in the Incarnation the purposes of God are perfectly fulfilled: God and sinners are reconciled; God became man in order that man might become God. That is why the angels sing, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.”

A holy and happy Christ Mass to you all.