

SERMON FOR CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS | 25.12.2022

Isaiah 52: 7-10; Hebrews 1: 25-29; St John 1: 1-14

So how do you like your carols?

Because, of all, the things that make Christmas ‘Christmas’, carols have to be up there in top ten most popular elements of this festival. Whether it means going to one of those big Cathedrals for a candlelit carol service or wrapping up really warm and singing out in the streets while collecting money for charity - or as tonight, dropping in for Midnight Mass - it is those immortal words that never fail to give us a cosy, warm feeling. We all have our favorites – and the odd one that we really don’t like – but the appeal of carols is pretty universal. They are certainly the best-known Christian songs and easily hold their own against *Rudolph the red nosed reindeer*, *I’m dreaming of a white Christmas*, and *Do they know it’s Christmas time at all?*

Forty years ago there was a bit of movement to start messing around with traditional hymn words – particularly to remove themes which seemed outdated. Onward Christian soldiers with all its military references is a classic example. What was:

*Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
with the cross of Jesus going on before:
Christ the royal Master leads against the foe;
forward into battle, see his banners go!
Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
with the cross of Jesus, going on before!*

became:

*Onward, Christian pilgrims, Christ will be our light:
see, the heav’nly vision breaks upon our sight!
Out of death’s enslavement Christ has set us free,
on then to salvation, hope and liberty:
Onward, Christian pilgrims, Christ will be our light;
see, the heavenly vision, hope and liberty.*

This year some American pastor has produced an alternative version of *God rest ye merry gentlemen* so that

*God rest you merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay,
remember Christ our Saviour was born on Christmas Day,
to save us all from Satan’s power when we were gone astray*

became:

*God rest you merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay,
remember Christ will bring love’s light the dawn of Christmas Day,
to lead us all from woe and sin when we have gone astray...*

So where the idea of Christians being like a military army has been ironed out in the first, the notion of a real Satan has been edited out in the second. And this American carol gets even more political as the verses wear on. “Leave our carols alone” many have said!

But why all the fuss? Everything else gets update, why not our carols?

During Communion tonight we are going to hear ‘O holy night’, one of the top ten classic carols. But the story behind the carol really made me think when I was doing a bit of research last night.

In the small town of Roquemaure in southern France, the priest persuaded a local poet, Placide Cappeau to write a carol to mark the opening of their new organ at Christmas 1843 and they enlisted a famous local composer, Adolphe Adam to write the music. It was an instant success

*O holy night! The stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear Saviour's birth
Long lay the world in sin and error pining till he appear'd 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! O hear the angel voices! O night divine, O night when Christ was born;

Everyone was pleased with the new song - until someone started to investigate the poet's faith and discovered he was a total atheist! *How could it be*, they debated, *that a total non-believer could produce such wonderful words?* And having shouted and screamed, the carol was banned from all churches in France ... until it became popular in America and was reimported into France a hundred years later. It now starts most Midnight Masses over there!

And that is what Isaiah is getting at in today's 1st reading. He's not very interested in branding and restrictions on who says what to whom. Standing in Arlington Square for the Christmas sing-along, two weeks ago, everyone was giving it their all as they sang, O come all ye faithful, Hark the Herald, O little town of Bethlehem and Ding dong merrily on high. Wearing Santa hats and drinking mulled wine, their minds no doubt went back to their childhoods when they sang these same words – in Sheffield, Shetland, Shanghai and Sydney.

And the prophetic words of Isaiah, ringing out tonight from nearly 3000 years ago, are still dead right: *Lift up your voices, together, sing for joy, see the return of our Lord to Zion.* Quite subconsciously, the world is looking for the return of the Prince of Peace - in Ukraine and Tigray, in China and in Myanmar. We all want what Jesus came to bring but there are very few ways of expressing that longing half as powerfully as those old traditional carols which not only say it so well but have that galvanizing power to unify people from so many different cultures and languages.

Of course there will be purists who want to ‘correct’ some of the outdated ideas of yesteryear – and I am as guilty as the next person for that as we try to make the music in our regular Sunday worship more than just a romp down memory lane.

But our God is a bit bigger than that: *Break forth into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; the Lord has revealed himself to every nation and all the earth shall see the salvation of our God* says Isaiah in our 1st reading.

Carols, especially traditional carols, are worth a million other words so I will shut up right now – but not before wishing you all a very Happy Christmas, full of the songs of carols which – in the mouths of Churchgoers and non-Churchgoers alike, celebrate what we can so easily forget: that when God sent his Son into the world as a small baby, he was showing us how love, hope and peace are all possible, even in a world that is as mixed up as it is right now.

And we often need good music to hear that message. Happy Christmas!