

Day 28: *Messiah: For unto Us a Child Is Born*

Christmas Day Bonus

*For unto us a Child is born,
unto us a Son is given,
unto us a Son is given:*

*And His name shall be called
Wonderful, Counselor,
The Mighty God,
The Everlasting Father,
The Prince of Peace,
The Everlasting Father,
The Prince of Peace.*

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

One of the great choruses of Handel's *Messiah* is *For unto Us a Child Is Born*. The lyrics are taken directly from the words of Isaiah, as he prophesied the birth of a Son who would be given "unto us."

Ever since Handel composed *Messiah* in 1741, professional musicians and ordinary music lovers the world over have praised the brilliance of his work. This is, of course, entirely warranted. Yet virtually forgotten in all this is the librettist for the masterpiece, Charles Jennens. A librettist is someone who writes a libretto (lyrics) in a classical choral piece. Jennens was a wealthy land-owner and patron of the arts, who frequently collaborated with Handel. In those days, the librettist was not considered to be nearly as important as the composer, but Jennens went a step further in his humility: he contributed his lyrics to *Messiah* both anonymously and without remuneration.

Truthfully, *Messiah* was actually Jennen's idea from the start. One day, Handel found himself at a loss as to what to write next. He asked his friend for suggestions. Jessens replied that there is only one subject big enough and worthy enough: the birth, death, resurrection and return of Christ. Handel was intrigued and finally said he'd do it if Jennens would write the libretto. Jennens asked if he was serious. Yes, Handel replied, how soon can you have the words? Jennens said: tomorrow morning. Thus, he wrote the entire *Messiah* lyrics literally overnight! It was possible only because virtually every word of *Messiah* is a direct quote from Scripture.

And after receiving the lyrics, Handel wrote the entire score of *Messiah* in just 24 days!

Isaiah's prophecy (which we sing in this brilliant anthem) speaks of Jesus' coming, not as a future event, but as if it had just occurred at the very moment he prophesied. This is how certain the word of the Lord was to the prophet. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." God did not devise his planned gift the night before Jesus' birth. No, the coming of *Messiah* was his plan from the beginning, first revealed in a veiled way at the time Adam and Eve were being reprimanded and ousted from the Garden (Genesis 3:15). And because the fulfilment of the prophecy lay in God's omnipotent hands, its fulfilment was altogether certain.

The hymn (following Isaiah) goes on to further identify this newborn son: "And his name

shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”

“Wonderful” translates the Hebrew term meaning miracle. “Counselor” points to his extraordinary wisdom to show us God’s true ways. “Mighty God” indicates that Jesus is not just a heroic man or even a superman. He is in fact divine. “Everlasting Father” shows Jesus as the head of a new race of humans; he’s the second Adam, and with his resurrection, he becomes the firstborn of the children of God. “Prince of Peace” foreshadows the peace that he will reestablish between us and God, as well as with each other. And because of all these things, “the government shall be upon his shoulder.” He will one day rule over all the earth.

Handel himself never married nor had children. In failing health and now blind, on April 6, 1759 the old composer insisted on attending a performance of *Messiah* in Covent Garden. Eight days later, he died. Though very generous with his earnings during his lifetime, Handel had accumulated considerable wealth. He left almost all of it to charities – for the care of orphans, the sick and the imprisoned. He was a grateful man who honored his Messiah in life and death.

Jesus is indeed the one subject truly worthy of our best. The child born to us is Messiah!

Questions

1. Who is it that you have helped to achieve their highest potential?
2. What are some ways that you can join in the Messiah’s work of establishing peace in and among people you know?
3. What are the best gifts you have and how can you employ them in the service of God?

Prayer

Jesus, you are the child born to us. We call you “wonderful Counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace” because you are all these to us, and more. We celebrate your birth because you are the answer to all our deepest longings – for wisdom, for hope, for life, for peace. You are Messiah, the only one worthy of our best. We worship you this Christmas, and we look for your coming again. Receive us as you receive our prayer, Jesus. Amen.