

Day 26: Coventry Carol

Dec. 23

*Refrain: Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child,
Bye bye, lully, lullay.
Thou little tiny child,
Bye bye, lully, lullay.*

*1 O sisters too, how may we do
For to preserve this day
This poor youngling for whom we sing,
“Bye bye, lully, lullay?”*

*2 Herod the king, in his raging,
Charged he hath this day
His men of might in his own sight
All young children to slay.*

*3 That woe is me, poor child, for thee
And ever mourn and may
For thy parting neither say nor sing,
“Bye bye, lully, lullay.”*

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. (Matthew 2:16)

Coventry Carol is an old English hymn, not altogether unknown in the US, but perhaps less familiar than most of our other selections. Dating to the medieval period, *Coventry Carol* originated as part of a mystery play, *The Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors*. Mystery plays, ten in number, were performed by guilds in their city of Coventry each year beginning in 1392.

The plays are based on various New Testament themes, and the one that *Coventry Carol* is drawn from depicts the account in Matthew 2. Joseph is warned in a dream of the impending raid by King Herod's men on Bethlehem. Their purpose was to massacre every male baby in the town, two years old or younger. Herod wanted to insure killing any potential rival to his throne. He set his target based on the wise men's account of when the star first appeared to them, for it had guided them to come seek him who is “born king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2).

In the mystery play, three mothers, babes in arms, appear on stage just after Joseph's prophetic dream. They sing their mournful lullaby to their infants, knowing that they will shortly be sacrificed to the maniacal ruler. Unlike virtually every other Christmas hymn, *Coventry Carol* does not end on the air of “happily ever after,” but on the haunting notes of impending death and its inevitable heartbreak. There was a terrible human cost to the birth of the Savior, one paid by innocent babies and grieving mothers.

In verse 1, the three mothers address each other, “O sisters too, how may we do for to preserve this day.” Yes, how they wish that their final day with their precious infants could be preserved/extended! They know what's coming, as verse 2 clearly shows: “Herod the king, in his raging, charged he hath this day His men of might in his own sight all young children to

slay.” The assassins are surely on their way, and (verse 3), “Woe is me, poor child, for thee and ever mourn and may For thy parting neither say nor sing Bye bye, lully, lullay.” This is the end, and no lullaby can deflect the jealous rage of the king.

In another vein, however, the song could just as easily have been sung by Mary to her son, Jesus. He too was innocent – even more so than the newborn babies of Bethlehem, as he alone was free from all guilt, even “original sin” that infects all the sons of Adam. Unlike the other babies who were both innocent and unaware when they were caught up in the wrath of sinful pride, Jesus came with the very purpose of giving his life for us all. Indeed, he was born to die, and one day he would consciously submit himself, despite his purity and innocence, to a violent death for the worst of human failing. It is to him that we also sing our lullaby this night.

Questions

1. Where are some places in the world today that you see innocents suffering?
2. What are a couple of ways that you can provide relief for those caught up in pain and troubles?
3. What suffering might you need to endure in the service of the one who came to die for us all?

Prayer

Jesus, we know that this world is not a fair or benign place. People suffer, including the innocent. You came to pay the price for all our sin, and we are profoundly grateful. Teach us never to be callous to the pains and troubles of those around us, but to follow you as you seek to bring hope to the disheartened, help to the hurting, salvation to the lost. We want to follow you, Jesus. Amen.