

Day 9: Good Christian Friends, Rejoice

Dec. 6

*1 Good Christian friends, rejoice
with heart and soul and voice;
give ye heed to what we say:
Jesus Christ was born today.
Ox and ass before him bow,
and he is in the manger now.
Christ is born today!
Christ is born today!*

*2 Good Christian friends, rejoice
with heart and soul and voice;
now ye hear of endless bliss:
Jesus Christ was born for this!
He has opened heaven's door,
and we are blest forevermore.
Christ was born for this!
Christ was born for this!*

*3 Good Christian friends, rejoice
with heart and soul and voice;
now ye need not fear the grave:
Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all
to gain his everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save!
Christ was born to save!*

“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? (John 14:2)

Good Christian Friends, Rejoice is an ancient medieval hymn, whose author is unknown. Originally written in Latin and German in the 14th century, the hymn was designed to teach the Christmas story to illiterate Christians.

Good Christian Friends, Rejoice was translated (rather loosely) into English by John Neale, who was an incredibly prolific scholar and author. His productivity is amazing in light of the fact that he was perpetually sick. Trained as a minister, his infirmities prevented him from having his own pulpit. In addition to his writing, Neale founded the Sisterhood of St. Margaret’s, including an orphanage, school, and a facility for the “reformation of fallen women.” Surprisingly, on at least one occasion, Neale suffered physical violence from a mob intolerant of his work with the order.

The light, happy tune almost invites us to rise up and dance along with all our Christian friends; there is something worth celebrating: “Jesus Christ is born today!” In each of its three verses, the “news” is broadcast, “Jesus Christ is born today!”

Verse 1 sets the scene: Jesus is in the manger, the barnyard animals bowing before him.

Yes, mere animals acknowledge his rulership.

Verse 2 reveals the purpose Jesus had for coming: “He hath opened heaven’s door, and ye are blessed forevermore.” Now that’s news. “Endless bliss”? Yes, “Jesus Christ was born for this!”

The final verse follows hard on this, “Now ye need not fear the grave.” Yes, death – universally feared – is no longer the great, dreaded enemy. Instead, “Jesus Christ was born to save! Calls you one and calls you all to gain his everlasting hall.” So our final destiny is not the grave, but to dance with Jesus in his great ballroom (“hall”). Indeed, “Christ was born to save!”

This simple presentation of the gospel (as every presentation) falls short of a full account of the Biblical story. And yet, it is enough to serve as a call to worship for any who might be attracted to come and see how good the Lord really is. As the psalmist invited us so long ago, “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8).

Questions

1. When you consider death, what emotions do you feel?
2. What has come to you this year as “news” regarding Christmas?
3. How would you outline the Christmas message (the meaning behind it, not just recounting the events) to someone not well acquainted with it?

Prayer

Jesus, I want to join with Christian friends in dancing and rejoicing at the good news of Christmas. Jesus, you’ve come for me! You came not to exacerbate my fears, but to remove them in the certainty of your love. You have opened heaven’s door. You call to me and to all. And I, this day, choose to bow before you in worship and humility as I receive your blessing, Jesus. Amen.