

Day 6: Sing We Now of Christmas

Dec. 3

*1 Sing we now of Christmas,
Noel, sing we here!
Hear our grateful praises
to the babe so dear.*

Refrain: *Sing we Noel, the King is born, Noel!
Sing we now of Christmas, sing we now Noel!*

*2 Angels called to shepherds,
“Leave your flocks at rest,
journey forth to Bethlehem,
find the lambkin blest.” [Refrain]*

*3 In Bethlehem they found him;
Joseph and Mary mild,
seated by the manger,
watching the holy child. [Refrain]*

*4 From the eastern country
came the kings afar,
bearing gifts to Bethlehem
guided by a star. [Refrain]*

*5 Gold and myrrh they took there,
gifts of greatest price;
there was ne’er a place on earth
so like paradise. [Refrain]*

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.
(Luke 2:16)

Sing We Now of Christmas is a traditional French carol. The author of the lyrics and the composer of the tune to which they are set are both lost to history. This is perhaps because when *Sing We Now of Christmas* emerged in the 15th century, hymns were not allowed in the Catholic Church in France.

But the people loved to sing, especially in the joyful Christmas season. Thus, the carol emerged as a true song of the people, sung in homes and especially in town square festivals for which children commonly donned shepherds' costumes. Though not sanctioned by the church hierarchy, the song is a fairly accurate representation of the Biblical narrative.

The hymn opens with a joyful declaration of purpose: “Sing We Now of Christmas, Noel sing we here!” The term *noel* comes from the Latin verb for “to be born,” and in English today *noel* always refers to the birth of Jesus. Verse 2 is devoted to a retelling of the angels’ announcement to the shepherds, and verse 3 records what those shepherds found when they went to Bethlehem: “Joseph and Mary mild, seated by the manger, watching the holy child.”

Verse 4 introduces the “kings” (referring to the wise men) who came from “the eastern country.” The kings are “bearing gifts to Bethlehem” and they are “guided by a star.” Each of these details is found in Matthew 2. The final stanza identifies two of the gifts the wise men brought: “gold and myrrh,” noting that they are “gifts of greatest price.” The upshot of the gift-giving is this: “There never was a stable so like paradise.”

This is a bit of an awkward image in English. Maybe the literal French makes the meaning a little clearer: “One brought gold, the other priceless incense; the stable thus seemed like Heaven.” The image here is unclear. Did the 15th century carol writer really believe that the presence of gold and incense could make a stable more heavenly – which I personally doubt, sensitive nose that I have! Or could it be that the song is alluding to the whole scene – Mary, Joseph, shepherds, wise men, angels, and especially the newborn “King” – that it was the whole amazing assembly that transformed the stable into a heavenly place?

Now *that* would certainly be worth singing about!

Questions

1. What parts of our contemporary Christmas celebration have emerged from our society (versus those prescribed by the church)?
2. Does your family observe any special Christmas traditions outside of organized worship services; for example, singing Christmas carols together, reading or retelling the Christmas story, dressing up in particular festive attire, etc.?
3. What difference do you think it would have made if the shepherds and wise men had appeared at the same time?

Prayer

Jesus, we delight that you have always received the celebrations of ordinary people like us. We do not have to be learned scholars or fully ordained priests in order for you to care about our worship. And we all stand before you equally loved: male and female, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, regardless of race or nationality or background. Your presence is what *all* of us seek, and it is You that we celebrate, Jesus. Amen.