

Day 5: God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen

Dec. 2

*1 God rest you merry, gentlemen,
let nothing you dismay,
remember Christ our Savior
was born on Christmas day,
to save us all from Satan's pow'r
when we were gone astray;*

Refrain: *O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy.*

*2 From God our heav'nly Father,
a blessed angel came;
and unto certain shepherds
brought tidings of the same:
how that in Bethlehem was born
the son of God by name, [Refrain]*

*3 "Fear not, then," said the angel,
"let nothing you affright;
this day is born a Savior
of a pure virgin bright,
to free all those who trust in him
from Satan's pow'r and might." [Refrain]*

*4 The shepherds at those tidings
rejoiced much in mind,
and left their flocks a-feeding,
in tempest, storm, and wind,
and went to Bethlehem straightway,
the Son of God to find. [Refrain]*

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:4-5)

God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen is one of our oldest Christmas carols, dating back to the 16th century if not earlier. Its author is lost to history. Over the centuries, it has endured many emendations, and thus it's difficult to know what the original form was, though most of the original language is retained. There are now at least seven stanzas, only four of which are usually printed.

The archaic language often prevents a clear understanding of the truly biblical underpinnings of the song. The very title provides an illustration. It does not read, "God rest you, merry gentlemen," as if addressing a group of happy ale-guzzling party-goers, wishing for God to give them a hangover-free sleep after the reveling is done. Here, I've actually placed the

comma in the wrong place, leading to the misinterpretation.

The actual title is: “God rest you merry, gentlemen.” It is not the gentlemen who are merry, but the longing for “rest.” And in old English verbiage, the requested “rest” means “to keep” or “to make”. Thus, the singer is uttering a blessing, “May God keep you joyful, gentlemen,” or “May God grant you peace and happiness, gentlemen.” This reflects the angel’s message to the shepherds when he said, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.”

“Let nothing you dismay, remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas day, to save us all from Satan’s pow’r when we were gone astray.” This is a thoroughly Scriptural admonition; we need not be upset (dismayed). Instead, we should remember that our Savior came to save us from Satan’s power. That power over us came as a result of our going astray (Genesis 3). But Christ now saves us from the curse. These, then, are “tidings of comfort and joy.”

It seems so easy to misunderstand the Bible’s actual message, not just some medieval hymn written in archaic language. For example, the disciples expected Jesus, as the Messiah, to lead his many followers (with themselves as his chief lieutenants) in military conquest over the hated Roman oppressors. They assumed the Kingdom of God was synonymous with Israel being top dog among the nations. But Jesus came to fight a very different and much bigger battle than they envisioned with a much more powerful and deadly foe. He came to defeat “Satan’s power” and even to destroy death itself!

To sing of his coming is to give voice to the most amazing “tidings of comfort and joy.”

Questions

1. What parts of the Christmas story have you misunderstood in the past?
2. In what ways do you need to hear anew the angel’s message: “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy”?
3. In what ways have you already been saved from Satan’s power?

Prayer

Jesus, you are both powerful and good, coming as you did with the express purpose of saving us, reversing the effects of the curse we brought upon ourselves with our selfish rebellion. We grasp what you’ve done only faintly. But our understanding, informed by prophets and apostles and even angels from ancient days, is enough to make us celebrate today. We delight in singing tidings of comfort and joy! Receive our praise, Lord Jesus. Amen.