

## Christmas Carols

Some of our finest Christian hymns are Christmas Carols. For that reason, I often think it is a pity that we sing them during only one season of year! Many of them contain profound theological truths as well as sublime poetry.

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,  
Hail, the Incarnate Deity.*

Some of our greatest hymn writers have contributed famous Christmas carols – Isaac Watts (*Joy to the World*), Charles Wesley (*Hark the herald angels sing*), Cecil Frances Alexander (*Once in Royal David's city*). Many famous composers have written music for Christmas carols, too – Handel (*Joy to the world*), Holst (*In the bleak mid winter*), Mendelssohn (*Hark the herald angels sing*), Sullivan (*It came upon a midnight clear*), and Vaughan Williams (*O little town of Bethlehem*).

## The Earliest Christmas Carols

Christmas carols in English first appeared in 1426, in a publication by John Awdlay, a Shropshire chaplain, who listed 25 "Caroles of Cristemas". But some of the carols we still sing today trace their origins much further back than this. The words of *O come, all ye faithful*, may have originated in the 13<sup>th</sup> century; and *Of the Father's Love Begotten* was written by a Spanish poet in the fifth century.

## The First Christmas Carol

But the very first carol pre-dates even the first Christmas! Mary's song, recorded for us by Luke, can be regarded as the very first Christmas carol – and it is a song of praise from which we can learn so much!

*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in  
God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the  
humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me -  
holy is his name.  
His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost  
thoughts. He has brought down rulers  
from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be  
merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
even as he said to our fathers."*  
[Luke 1.46-55]

## Magnify the Lord with me

The old King James Version still has the most graphic translation of Mary's opening words; it describes her soul as *magnifying* the Lord. When we magnify something, we don't make the object *itself* any bigger. That's usually impossible. What we actually do is make the object *appear* bigger to us.

- When we look at the moon through a telescope, we don't change its *actual* size - that's impossible. What we do is change its *apparent* size so that it *appears* bigger to us. A telescope enables us to see the details of the moon's surface.
- Similarly, when we look at an insect through a microscope, we don't change the actual size of the insect. That would be terrifying! What we do is change its apparent size so that we can examine it in more detail.

So, for Mary, the unfolding events of the first Christmas gave her a bigger perspective on God. She was enabled to see him in more detail as it were. She couldn't change his *actual* size, for God is infinite in his power, wisdom, and purposes. But God now filled her complete field of view. He was magnified to her. Her innermost being, her deep-down real self (her soul), gained a far greater appreciation of God and his purposes than she had ever had before.

She had been completely bowled over by the message that God's angel, Gabriel, had brought her. God was about to bring his One and Only eternal Son into the world - and he was going to do so through her! It was something that completely blew her mind away. She had never before realised that God could do anything even remotely like that! But she believed in her heart that what the angel had told her would happen. *Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished*, her cousin, Elizabeth, exclaimed.

Mary's soul had gained a greater appreciation of God and his purposes – and that in turn led her *spirit* to *jump for joy!* Luke uses the same word to describe Mary's reaction as he uses to describe the baby leaping in Elizabeth's womb. Because Mary's *soul* had a bigger appreciation of God, her *spirit* simply overflowed in wonder and praise.

This surely is the effect that the events of the first Christmas should have on us. They should lead us to have *a bigger view of God, a deeper appreciation of his power and purposes*; and as a result, *our spirits should be enlivened to overflow with joy and praise!*

The rest of Mary's song sets out the great things God has done for us as his people. See if you can spot the theme of C-A-R-O-L-S in Mary's song!

## **God has done great things for us**

Mary recognised that

### ➤ **God Cares for ordinary people.**

*He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.* God isn't just for the rich and famous. God isn't even just for the clever or religious. God is for those whose circumstances and abilities are very ordinary - those whose *state* is *humble*. That means, *God is for each one of us*. This is why *from now on all generations will call me blessed*, Mary explains - not because she was someone special in herself, but because she serves as an example for all time of God choosing to work extraordinary things through very ordinary people.

Mary also realised that

### ➤ **God Acts on behalf of individuals**

*The Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name.* God doesn't just act on behalf of his people in a general kind of way. The Gospel is something intensely personal. Jesus died for me, we can each say if we are a believer (Gal 2.20). God has gifted his Holy Spirit to me. God has reserved a place in heaven for me.

In all the other religions of the world, the adherents are preoccupied with what they must do to commend themselves to God. The message of Christianity is unique good news (Gospel) because it tells us what God has done for us. This is why *his name is holy*. God is in a class of his own. His characters and actions are unique. There is no other god like him.

Mary then rejoiced that

### ➤ **God Reaches out in mercy to people**

*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.* We could liken God's mercy to a giant telescopic arm, able to stretch out to people beyond our normal human reach. There is no one so far away from God as to be beyond his reach.

- God stretched out his hand of mercy to the despised shepherds, in the middle of their night shift, on the hills surrounding Bethlehem;
- God stretched out his hand of mercy to the Magi in the east as they studied the night sky;
- Jesus stretched out his hand of mercy to tax collectors and prostitutes, the sick and dying, during his days on earth.
- He stretched out his hand of mercy to the condemned criminal dying on the cross alongside him

Mary next acknowledged that

### ➤ **God Overthrows proud tyrants**

*He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones.* The greatest obstacle to spiritual blessing is inward pride, the

kind of pride that refuses to give God his rightful place in our lives. *God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble*, 1 Peter 5.5 tells us. Herod was a proud ruler whom God dethroned; Pontius Pilate was another. These earthly rulers are long since dead, but Jesus now reigns forever as God's eternal king!

Mary also recognised that

### ➤ **God Lifts up the bowed down**

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.* Christmas for some is like heaven on earth, a time of sheer delight. There are happy family reunions to be enjoyed, good food to eat, and unexpected gifts that come as a wonderful surprise to cause us huge delight. But for others, Christmas may be a time they dread. The family reunions will be tense, because of previous breakdowns; or sad, perhaps, because of the recent loss of a loved one. Some have no family to join with over Christmas. Others may be caring for a sick or dying relative. Many find they cannot compete with the commercial expectations of this time of year, and worry about the debt they will get into trying to give their children what their friends will be getting.

So, it is important for us to remember that real joy doesn't stem from what we have; it flows from those we know. Ultimately, good relationships satisfy us most. And there is no greater relationship for any of us to enjoy than a relationship with God as our loving Father in heaven, through Jesus his Son. *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* So we say with confidence, *"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"* *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever* [Hebrews 13.5-6,8]. God lifts up those who are bowed down by reminding us that we have Jesus, and nothing in all creation can separate us from his love (Rom 8.39).

Finally, Mary celebrated the fact that

### ➤ **God Satisfies us like no one or nothing else**

*He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.* Only God can truly satisfy the hunger of our human hearts. It has often been said that we can no more satisfy our soul with things than we can quench our thirst with salt water or alleviate our hunger with sawdust. It is simply how we have been made – good food for stomachs, but God for our souls.

So, like Mary, enjoy singing carols this Christmas season. Magnify the Lord, and your spirit will jump for joy!

**David Hunt**