

Donnybrook

25 December 2021

Welcome

Welcome again everybody. It is a pity that again this year we are not allowed to sing, especially at Christmas, because the tunes are known and no-one is afraid to join the singing of *O Come All Ye Faithful* or *Silent Night*.

Topic

The place of music at Christmas could be a study in itself. Better than any sermon, the carols do three things: they tell the story, they teach amazingly pure Christian doctrine and they proclaim the Good News.

Steps

Of course, Christmas carols can become a kind of musical wallpaper, present nearly everywhere, elevator music, as it was put in *American Beauty*. But it is worth stopping and just listening to what is being said. A popular carol such as *The First Noel* tells the whole story very comprehensively. We hear of the crib, the baby, the angels, shepherds, the Magi. And it invites us along:

So let us all with one accord
sing praises to our heavenly Lord.

And it is not just the story. *Adeste fideles* offers unexpectedly pure Christian doctrine. We hear words which echo the Creed we say every Sunday

God of God, light of light,
Very God, begotten, not created:

And again, we are invited to join in:

O come, let us adore Him, (3×)
Christ the Lord.

There is even more. *O Holy Night*, the *Cantique de Noel*, is popular this time of year. We can all join in parts of it but the whole song is a challenge because of the vocal range. It really needs a good soloist. There is an interesting story behind this Christmas canticle.

In 1843, in the village of Roquemaure, the stained glass windows of the church had just been renovated. To mark the occasion, the priest asked a local poet, Placide Cappeau, to compose a canticle. The result was "O holy night", now heard all over the world. This is a little more than ironic, because Cappeau was an atheist and strongly anti-clerical, but evidently flattered to have been asked. Not only that, the music was composed by Adolphe Adam, who was of Jewish ancestry, without especial attachment of the feast itself.

Still, like other Christmas carols, it tells the story and the doctrine.

O Holy night! The stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Saviour's birth

But in the third verse, it goes on to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, in the following arresting words:

Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His Gospel is Peace
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother
And in His name, all oppression shall cease.

Suddenly, in the middle of a cosy Christmas carol, we hear the social calling of Christianity: to love one another, to make peace, to set free. The English translation appeared shortly afterwards in the US and this third verse resonated powerfully with the abolitionists, who wanted an end to slavery. With powerful words and an energetic tune, it is no surprise that *O Holy Night* became known as the *Marseillaise religieuse*.

Conclusion

Christmas is a joyful feast and the music is very much part of it. We celebrate how much God loves us, by coming close to us in a single, fragile life, and speaking words of love to us from the inside out. In the words of St John, God so loved the world. It remains a source of wonder, of course, captured in the words of a poet confrere of mine. At the end of his marvellous poem called *Christmas*, Pádraig Daly concludes:

And how can we,
Loving so little,
Fettered by knowledge,
Believe in such excessive love?

Amen.