

December 25, 2020

## **Hark! The Herald Angels Sing** A Christmas Homily

### **A Bit of History**

Originally penned by Charles Wesley in 1739. The song did not include the “chorus” at the end, repeating the first line of the song. The first line was slightly different from what we are used to. It proclaimed that *the firmament* rang with glory to the King of Kings. There was no direct reference to angels in the original.

In 1754, George Whitefield modified it, changing the first line to the version with which we are familiar. In 1782, the chorus was adopted in an English hymnal.

It wasn't until 1855, that William Cummings mated the lyrics to a cantata composed by Felix Mendelssohn in 1840, giving us the hymn that we know today. The version we sang this morning was the Cummings song in its full form, from the *Cantus Christi*. Commonly, a shorter version with only three of the five verses is used, as it appears in many other hymnals.

### **The Song and Christian Theology**

We will follow Wesley's 10 stanzas and see how he develops the story of the incarnation as a statement of theology.

First, the purpose of the Incarnation was to satisfy Divine wrath and restore men to God's favor. This is expressed in the words from the first stanza:

*Peace on Earth, and Mercy mild  
God and Sinners reconciled*

From the second stanza:

*Joyful all ye Nations rise  
Join the Triumph of the Skies  
Universal Nature say,  
Christ the LORD is born today!*

And from the sixth stanza:

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*Mild he lays his Glory by  
Born – that Man no more may die  
Born – to raise the Sons of Earth  
Born – to give them Second Birth*

This purpose is central to the Christian understanding of Christmastide. It is not merely that God gave us a gift; what is important is what that gift represents: our only path to God and His righteousness. We are **reconciled** to God by Jesus Christ.

Second, we celebrate the Eternality of the Son of God in the third & fourth stanzas:

*CHRIST, by highest heaven adored  
CHRIST, the everlasting Lord  
Late in time behold him come  
Offspring of a Virgin's womb*

*Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see  
Hail the Incarnate Deity!  
Pleased as man with men to dwell  
JESUS, our Immanuel here!*

Notice the clear Chalcedonian statement of the hypostatic union. Jesus the man is Christ **the everlasting God**. His deity is veiled in flesh, not transformed into flesh.

Third, Wesley calls attention to the **resurrection**. The incarnation would be without effect if Jesus is not raised from the dead. This is brought out in the fifth & sixth stanzas:

*Light and Life to all he brings  
Risen with Healing in his Wings*

*Mild he lays his glory by  
Born – that Man no more may die  
Born – to raise the Sons of Earth*

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*Born – to give them Second Birth*

We can no more separate the resurrection from the birth of Jesus than we can separate our own resurrection from that of Jesus. One depends on the other.

Fourth, we proclaim the **Victory of Christ & His Church**, in the seventh & eighth stanzas:

*Rise, the Woman's Conquering Seed  
Bruise in us the Serpent's head (cf. Rom 16:20)*

*Now display Thy saving Power  
Ruined Nature now restore  
Now in Mystic Union join  
Thine to ours, and ours to Thine*

Finally, the song makes a plea for the Church's sanctification. This is the message of stanzas nine and ten:

*Adam's likeness, LORD, efface  
Stamp Thy image in its place  
Second Adam from above  
Reinstate us in thy Love*

*Let us Thee, though lost, regain  
Thee, the Life, the Inner Man:  
Oh! to all Thyself impart  
Formed in each Believing Heart*

## **Conclusion**

The Eternal Son of God Incarnate to redeem mankind from bondage to sin  
The centrality of the resurrection in the Christian message  
Total victory of heaven over earth, & the church's participation in that conquest.  
The necessity of the Church reflecting the image of Christ, of being drawn into Him.

This is the message of Christmas, brought to us by Chas. Wesley's great hymn.