

## Adeste Fideles!

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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois – December 24, 2016 (Christmas Eve)

As Protestants we claim it's the Bible that forms our belief. But the fact is, *the songs we sing* often come closer to expressing our faith. Our understanding of what Christmas means to us might be shaped more by our favorite Christmas carols than by how Scripture brings out the impact of the birth of the Son of God. For that reason it's a good idea to look at the words of those familiar carols and ask, "What are they telling us about Jesus, and how do they bring out what the Bible is telling us?" Or, to ask the question another way, "Do we always pay attention to the words of those familiar Christmas songs, and ask what they really mean?"

We opened our worship this evening with one of the more popular carols, "O Come, All Ye Faithful." We're so familiar with his carol that we might not pause to consider what we're saying when we sing it. Let's have a look at those words and ask what they're telling us about the birth of Jesus.

This carol was composed in the 1700s by a man named John Francis Wade. He was a Catholic, and he wrote the carol in Latin. I remember, as a child in elementary school, how I was taught to sing the first stanza in Latin:

*Adeste Fideles laeti triumphantes,  
Venite, venite in Bethlehem.  
Natum videte, Regem Angelorum;  
Venite adoremus, venite adoremus,  
Venite adoremus Dominum!*

That was in *public school*, mind you, in the days before Christian faith became a "no-no" in public schools or any venue supported by tax money. In fact, my second grade teacher had us recite the Lord's Prayer every day. You may have seen some recent polls that tell us a large majority of people in this country think the nation is going in the wrong direction. Does the drive to remove all expressions of Christian faith from the public square have anything to do with that? I wonder!

But let's go back to our carol, stanza by stanza, and bring out what it says.

*O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,  
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem!  
Come and behold Him, born the King of angels!  
O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!*

What word is repeated in this opening stanza — repeated six times? The word *come!* Have we considered how important it is to *come* into the presence of the Lord? To come eagerly, to come with excitement and anticipation, to come regularly? We can't experience the impact of the birth of Jesus if we don't *come*, if we just stay where we are. I feel sorry for people who don't think it's important to come to Jesus, and to gather with the body of Christ — with those who, Scripture says, form the temple in which his Spirit dwells. I'm sorry for people who don't want to *come*.

So we come. But what do we *come to do?* "Come and behold him . . . O come, let us adore him." The purpose of our coming isn't to be entertained by a great program — or bored by a poor one. It isn't to be educated by great Bible teaching. And it isn't to make ourselves look like better Christians. What does the carol say? We come to *behold the Lord*, to meet with him and sense his presence. We come to *adore him*, to offer the worship he deserves as King of kings and Lord of lords. That's what the Bible says we're to do, as in Psalm 100: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!" (Psalm 100:4). "O come, let us adore him" — every stanza of this carol ends with that refrain.

Are you free in your heart, tonight, to *adore* the Lord Jesus, as did the shepherds and the Magi at that first Christmas long ago? Or is something holding you back — perhaps your own pride, or perhaps your own sense of

*Adeste Fideles!*

*Looking at a Familiar Carol*



unworthiness which, I suggest, is really the same thing? Jesus has come as the “new man,” and offers you the opportunity to become one with him and break free into a life filled with joy, thanksgiving, and adoration.

In the second stanza of our carol, John Francis Wade turns to the Nicene Creed, a statement of basic Christian belief that comes from the ancient church. This creed arose in the fourth century partly in response to heretical movements that were denying the Trinity, and claiming that the Son is a created, lesser being than the Father. It says:

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.*

Wade put this creedal statement into these words:

*God of God, Light from Light eternal,  
Lo, He abhors not the Virgin's womb;  
Very God, begotten, not created.*

Here we think of several New Testament passages. At the beginning of his Gospel, John writes: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:1-4). John goes on to record Jesus’ words: “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9); “as long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:5).

In the Bible, just as for us, “light” is a metaphor for knowledge and understanding. The Creed, and the carol, remind us what Scripture proclaims: Jesus is the light, the window into the truth about our life — and the true nature of God the Creator. We can’t separate our knowledge of God from what Jesus reveals about him; nor can we separate our understanding of what human life is supposed to be from the life we see in Jesus.

Then, too, we recall here the words of Paul in Galatians 4: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5). Our Christmas story centers in the birth of Jesus, a physical baby born to a real woman, Mary (or Miriam), in a specific city, Bethlehem in Judea. The story of Jesus isn’t set somewhere in the clouds, nor is it just a concept in the ethereal world of philosophers and theologians. It’s a down-to-earth story of real human life: “Lo, he abhors not the virgin’s womb.”

Can you imagine Jesus as a real man who got hungry, who became tired and slept, who paid taxes, who wept when his friend died — a real man who had to go to the bathroom, who perhaps didn’t smell so good because he didn’t have toothpaste and couldn’t shower every day? In sending his Son the Father, as it were, sacrificed his own pride to manifest himself at our level, in our own grungy, day-to-day circumstance of human life, birth and death. As Paul puts it in Philippians, Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:6-7).

But let’s go on to stanza three:

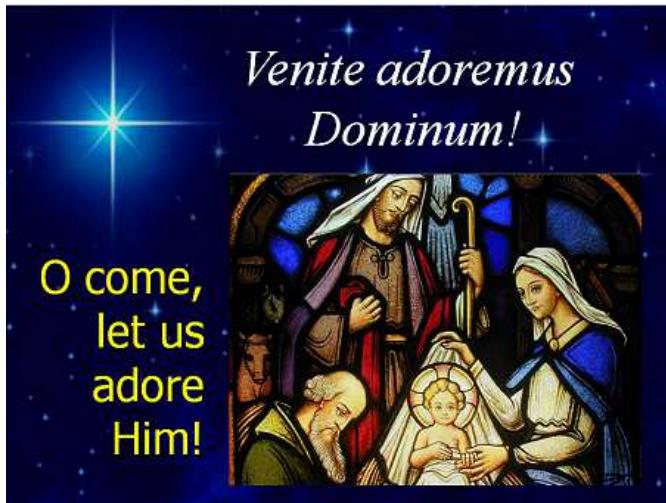
*Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation!  
Sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above;  
Glory to God, all glory in the highest!*

When we celebrate Christmas, we’re not alone. Scripture reminds us that our joy at the manifestation of God’s presence is a mirror of the greater joy in the realm of the spirit. Isaiah the prophet, in the temple, heard the seraphim calling, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” In the communion service of many churches the congregation sings a hymn called the *Sanctus*, introduced by these words: “Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name, evermore praising thee and saying, ‘Holy, holy, holy . . .’” In this third stanza of *Adeste Fideles*, the composer echoes those words of the host of heaven so familiar to us at Christmas: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased” (Luke 2:14).

It’s an encouragement to know that the purpose of God isn’t limited to what we see happening here in this earthly arena. Things are taking place “behind the scenes,” as we say, to bring about the new creation God has

planned for us to live in. As Paul says, "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7) because we know the Holy Spirit is at work in ways not visible to the human eye, and the praise of the Creator is being lifted throughout his creation both visible and invisible. Let's never be discouraged about what we see around us; let's join the hymn of praise offered up by "choirs of angels . . . all ye citizens of heaven above." In fact, as believers in Jesus *we're* citizens of that same heaven, God's own space where Jesus reigns as King and from which he comes, as Paul says, to "transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21).

In the final stanza of this carol, John Francis Wade expresses the same thought: that we join in the universal praise that greets the coming of the Lord Jesus, the Word of God:



*Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning,  
Jesus, to Thee be all glory giv'n;  
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!*

That's the heart of the Christmas proclamation. As John's Gospel puts it, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). God has spoken to us not in words thundered from a mountain, nor even in lines of type on a printed page, but in a man, a person with a flesh-and-blood body like yours and mine. *His Word to us is a life*, the life that Jesus lived — a life that manifested the reality of the kingdom of God and the promise of healing and transformation in God's new creation.

So "come, let us adore him" — not just because Jesus was born twenty centuries ago, not just because he'll come to us at some unknown future date, but because *he's here with us now*. He's here in the life of every person who has given their life over to him, and become "one spirit with the Lord" as Paul says (1 Corinthians 6:17). He's here in his temple, the worshiping body of Christ that lifts praise to his presence and seeks to do his will in this world. He's here as the host at his Table, offering us the tokens of his life: the bread of his word, the blood of his covenant that binds us to him. *Venite adoremus Dominum.* "O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord."

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