

# Sing Christmas



## Daily Reflections through Advent on Favourite Carols

By Anne Le Bas  
Advent 2014

These reflections are also available on the church blog  
<http://sealpeterandpaul.blogspot.co.uk>,  
where you will also find YouTube clips of the carols.

## Introduction

For most people Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without its familiar music. Even Richard Dawkins is reputed to have a soft spot for Christmas carols. Some Christmas carols have become so familiar, though, that we have stopped noticing what they say. They become no more than background music, and the theological and spiritual ideas which they express are lost.

In this Advent series of thoughts, we'll take a carol a day and think about its words. There will be some questions and a Bible verse to ponder, and, if you can access the church blog, a Youtube clip of the carol to listen to.

## What is a Christmas Carol?

Carols were originally folk tunes designed for dancing. The word "carol" comes from French, Latin and Greek roots which all have to do with dancing. Carols weren't necessarily associated with Christmas, and they weren't written to be sung in church. They were the songs of the people, songs to be sung when they got together to celebrate informally. Christmas carols became popular first in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, but were suppressed after the Reformation. The Puritans, who famously tried to ban Christmas celebrations, took a particularly dim view of them.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries they began to enjoy new popularity. Catchy tunes and vivid imagery helped them to become the familiar element of Christmas that they now are. Some carols are simple retellings of the Christmas story, like *The First Nowell*, some are full of profound theology, like *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*. Some are loud, even raucous, others gentle and meditative, but all have become popular because they somehow help us to enter into the story of the nativity and enjoy it anew.

The Carol Service in the form we know it now originated in 1880, when Edward Benson, then Bishop of Truro, decided to hold a

service on Christmas Eve, allegedly to keep the men out of the pubs. Whether it met that aim is unknown!

Carol singing outdoors is a much older tradition, going back to the custom of “wassailing”, which is probably pre-Christian in origin. Bands of singers went from door to door at mid-winter asking for food and drink in return for a song. Gradually Christian carols were added to the secular wassail songs, but there has always been a sense in which this activity was semi-detached from the Church, and it remains popular among those who aren’t churchgoers.

However we sing our Christmas carols, they give us a chance to think about the story of the first Christmas and find its meaning in our own lives.

- *What are your earliest memories of singing Christmas carols?*
- *Are there any that you particularly love (or hate!)*

## November 30 – Advent Sunday

O come, O come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny  
From depths of Hell thy people save  
And give them victory o'er the grave

O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and  
cheer  
Our spirits by thine advent here  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

O come, thou Key of David, come,  
And open wide our heavenly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery.

O come, O come, Thou Lord of might,  
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height,  
In ancient times did'st give the Law,  
In cloud, and majesty and awe.

From the <i>Great O Antiphons</i> , 12-13 <sup>th</sup> C, trans. John Mason Neale (1818-1866)
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We begin our meditations with a few carols and hymns associated with Advent rather than Christmas. Advent comes from a Latin word that means “to come”. In Advent we think about those who at the time of Christ longed for God’s promised Messiah to come, and we think too of our own longings for ourselves and for the world.

This hymn draws on a traditional set of responses used at the evening service of Vespers called the “*Great O Antiphons*”. They plead for Christ to come, using Biblical images for Jesus that have their roots in the Old Testament. Though the hymn is ancient, the longings of those who wrote it are easily recognisable. They feel they are in exile. They long to come home, to be free, to find light and hope in times of trouble, and to find God’s guiding presence now, just as ancient Israel did when Moses was given the Law on Mount Sinai. The refrain reassures them that help is on the way.

- *Which verse of the hymn speaks to you most powerfully?*
- *What do you long for right now?*
- *Do you believe God will give you what you need and long for?*

**Bible Reading:** Jesus says: Listen! I am standing at the door and knocking: if you hear my voice and open the door I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. *Revelation 3.20*

## December 1

Wake, o wake! with tidings thrilling  
the watchmen all the air are filling,  
arise, Jerusalem, arise!  
Midnight strikes! no more delaying,  
"The hour has come!" we hear them  
saying.

Where are ye all, ye virgins wise?  
The Bridegroom comes in sight,  
raise high your torches bright!  
Alleluia! The wedding song  
swells long and strong:  
go forth and join the festal throng.

Zion hears the watchmen shouting,  
her heart leaps with joy undoubting,  
she stands and waits with eager eyes;  
adorned with truth and grace  
unending!

Her light burns clear, her star doth rise.  
Now come, thou precious Crown,  
Lord Jesus, God's own Son!  
Hosanna! Let us prepare  
to follow there,  
where in thy supper we may share.

Every soul in thee rejoices;  
from men and angelic voices  
be glory given to thee alone!  
Thy presence never more shall leave  
us,  
we stand with angels round thy throne.  
Earth cannot give below  
the bliss thou dost bestow.  
Alleluia! Grant us to raise  
to length of days,  
the triumph-chorus of thy praise.

Words: Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608), 1597;  
trans. Francis Crawford Burkitt (1864-1935), 1906  
Music: Wachet auf (Philipp Nicolai, 1556-1609, harm. Johann Sebastian Bach,  
1685-1750)

This hymn, written by German Lutheran pastor, Philipp Nicolai, is based on the story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1–13). Five have enough oil to provide light when the Bridegroom finally arrives, but the others haven't, and aren't ready to join in the rejoicing. It urges us to be ready for God to show up in our lives, ready to be part of his new kingdom.

They hymn also draws on Old Testament images from Isaiah 40.9 which calls on the people of Jerusalem (Zion) to recognise and proclaim the moment when God comes to rescue them from their exile in Babylon. "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings...say to the cities of Judah, ' Here is your God!"

- *Are there times in your life when you have found yourself unprepared to deal with life, caught on the back foot?*
- *How can we have our eyes open to the presence of God in our lives, each day, in the good times and the bad? What stops this happening?*

**Bible Reading:** My soul waits for the Lord, more than those who watch for the morning. *Psalms 130*

## December 2

Lo! He comes with clouds descending,  
Once for favoured sinners slain;  
Thousand thousand saints attending,  
Swell the triumph of his train:  
Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!  
God appears on earth to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him  
Robed in dreadful majesty;  
We who set at naught and sold him,  
Pierced and nailed him to the tree,  
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply  
wailing,  
Shall the true Messiah see.

Those dear tokens of his passion  
Still his dazzling body bears;  
Cause of endless exultation  
To his ransomed worshippers;  
With what rapture, with what rapture,  
with what rapture  
Gaze we on those glorious scars!

Yea, Amen! let all adore thee,  
High on thine eternal throne;  
Saviour, take the power and glory,  
Claim the kingdom for thine own;  
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!  
Thou shalt reign, and thou alone

Charles Wesley 1707- 88, based on verses by John Cennick 1718-55

This hymn, written by the great Methodist hymn-writer, Charles Wesley, reminds us that God's presence can be challenging as well as comforting.

Advent is not only a time when we recall the first "coming" of Jesus in Bethlehem, but also, traditionally, a time to contemplate his "second coming". For most of Christian history Christians took this belief literally. Christ would reappear, "*with clouds descending*" at some future point in history. For some this was a very important idea. African-American slaves sung of it often in their songs; the second coming meant the end of their sufferings, as Christ would establish justice. Many Christians now would understand this metaphorically, though, believing that Christ comes into the world daily in us and through us, and to us through the lives of others. Whatever we believe about the second coming, the idea that Christ might show up at some point can be uncomfortable. Would we be in a state of "endless exultation" or will we be "deeply wailing" if his light shone into our hearts?

- *What do you believe about the second coming of Christ?*
- *If Christ came back tomorrow, what might you wish you had got around to changing in your life?*

**Bible Reading:** God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. *John 3.17*

## December 3

O little town of Bethlehem,  
how still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
the silent stars go by;  
yet in thy dark streets shineth  
the everlasting Light;  
the hopes and fears of all the years  
are met in thee tonight.

O morning stars, together  
proclaim the holy birth!  
and praises sing to God the King,  
and peace to men on earth.  
For Christ is born of Mary;  
and gathered all above,  
while mortals sleep, the angels keep  
their watch of wondering love.

How silently, how silently,  
the wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts  
the blessings of his heaven.  
No ear may hear his coming,  
but in this world of sin,  
where meek souls will receive him, still  
the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,  
descend to us, we pray:  
cast out our sin and enter in,  
be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels  
the great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us,  
our Lord Emmanuel!

Philip Brooks (1835-1893)

This is surely one of the most popular of all Christmas carols. It is a tender evocation of the town (in reality no more than a village) of Bethlehem, in the middle of an apparently ordinary night, unaware that something world changing is happening in it - *“the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”*

Bethlehem had found itself centre-stage unexpectedly once before. It was the birthplace of the child who would become the great King David. He was just a shepherd boy when he was anointed by Samuel, the youngest and smallest of the family, almost overlooked, living in an insignificant backwater. Bethlehem was not grand or wealthy – an unlikely place for a King - or a Messiah - to be born, ut this is where it happens, when no one is looking - *“while mortals sleep”*.

The carol encourages us to see ourselves too as the birthplace of Jesus, however unlikely that might feel. We are the place in which God chooses to come into the world. “Be born in us today” says the carol.

- *Have you ever lived anywhere where something significant once happened? What would you feel if you discovered that someone important had been born next door to you?*
- *How easy do you find it to think of the words “be born in us today” as applying to you?*

**Bible Reading:** The Word became flesh, and lived among us. *John 1.14*

## December 4

Of the Father's heart begotten,  
ere the world from chaos rose,  
he is Alpha: from that Fountain  
all that is and hath been flows;  
He is Omega, of all things  
yet to come the mystic Close!  
Evermore and evermore!

By his word was all created;  
He commanded and 'twas done;  
Earth and sky and boundless ocean,  
Universe of three in one,  
All that sees the moon's soft radiance,  
All that breathes beneath the sun  
Evermore and evermore!

O how blest that wondrous birthday  
When the Maid the curse retrieved,  
brought to birth mankind's salvation,  
By the Holy Ghost conceived;  
And the Babe, the world's Redeemer,  
In her loving arms received,  
Evermore and evermore!

Sing ye heights of heav'n his praises  
Angels and Archangels sing!  
Wheresoe'r ye be, ye faithful,  
let your joyous anthems ring,  
Ev'ry tongue his name confessing  
Countless voices answering  
Evermore and evermore!

Aurelius Clemens Prudentius 348-413, trans. Roby Furley Davis, 1906.

This is one of our most ancient Christmas Carols, translated from a Latin hymn from the fourth century, which was written by Aurelius Prudentius. He was a Roman Christian from what is now Northern Spain. He was a lawyer and provincial governor, but late in life withdrew to follow an ascetic way of life, writing poetry, hymns and theological works.

His hymn is a beautiful meditation on the Incarnation, written in mystical language, which sets the birth of Jesus in the context of the grand story of creation and re-creation. It echoes the language of the first chapter of John's Gospel, often read at Christmas, "*In the beginning was the Word...All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*" We are part of that creation, part of "*all that sees the moon's soft radiance*". Although this beauty has been marred by human sin, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is the start of a re-creation, which heals that damage. He is a gift to us that is "*of the Father's heart*", a gift of his love for a world he will never abandon.

- *Read the hymn slowly. Which phrases or words stand out for you?*
- *Who or what is on your heart today; people you care for or worry about? In the same way, you are on God's heart today. How does that make you feel?*

**Bible Reading:** See what kind of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. *1 John 3. 1*



## December 5

It came upon the midnight clear,  
That glorious song of old,  
From angels bending near the earth,  
To touch their harps of gold;  
"Peace on the earth, good will to men,  
From Heaven's all gracious King."  
The world in solemn stillness lay,  
To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they  
come  
With peaceful wings unfurled,  
And still their heavenly music floats  
O'er all the weary world;  
Above its sad and lowly plains,  
They bend on hovering wing,  
And ever over its Babel sounds  
The blessed angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife  
The world has suffered long;  
Beneath the angel strain have rolled  
Two thousand years of wrong;  
And man, at war with man, hears not  
The love-song which they bring;  
O hush the noise, ye men of strife  
And hear the angels sing.

For lo! the days are hastening on,  
By prophet-bards foretold,  
When with the ever circling years  
Comes round the age of gold;  
When peace shall over all the earth  
Its ancient splendours fling,  
And the whole world send back the  
song  
Which now the angels sing.

Edmund Hamilton Sears 1810 -1876

Written by a Unitarian minister in Wayland, Massachusetts, this carol speaks of God's peace coming to the world. Sears imagines angels singing not just to the shepherds, but to the whole world, announcing a new way of peace to any who will listen to it.

The carol was written twelve years before the U.S. Civil war in 1861. Perhaps Sears was aware of mounting tension? This is certainly a carol tinged with sadness at the way in which "men of strife" (and women too) so often fail to hear God's voice. The future, implies this carol, is in our hands. God, in Christ, has given us what we need to live in peace. It is up to us whether we use his gift wisely.

- *Are you hopeful for the world? What are your worries for it?*
- *"Hush the noise, ye men of strife" – What is the "noise" you might need to "hush" in your life?*

**Bible Reading:** For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. *Isaiah 9.6-7*

## December 6

Ding Dong! merrily on high  
In heav'n the bells are ringing  
Ding, dong! verily the sky  
Is riv'n with angel singing  
*Gloria, Hosanna in excelsis*

E'en so here below, below  
Let steeple bells be swungen  
And i-o, i-o, i-o  
By priest and people sungen

Pray you dutifully prime  
Your matin chime, ye ringers  
May you beautifully rime  
Your evetime song, ye singers.

George Ratcliffe Woodward 1848-1934
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This carol sounds very old, but in fact was first published in 1924. Its author, George Ratcliffe Woodward, had an interest in ancient poetry, and presumably just wanted to make the carol sound archaic. He set it to a genuinely old French dance tune, however; "*Branle de l'Official*" was first published in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

It is a carol that expresses the pure joy of the Christmas celebration. It paints a picture of heaven rejoicing at the birth of Christ, and invites us to join in with the song in whatever way we can. It can be quite a challenge to sing, with its long chorus of Glorias, but the challenge often seems to make it more fun. It's impossible to sing it without smiling!

The first verse, with its image of heavenly rejoicing echoes two of Jesus' parables, in which he talks about a lost sheep and a lost coin. (Luke 15.3-9). Their owners search for them high and low. When they find what they had lost they call their neighbours to a party to rejoice with them, probably spending as much on the festivities as the sheep and the coin were worth in the first place! In the same way, he says, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine who need (or think they need) no repentance.

- *When did you last feel a sense of pure joy, and what caused it?*
- *What is the most joyful part of Christmas to you? What about it makes you happy?*
- *Have you ever resented the joy of others, feeling jealous of them or that they were not entitled to their rejoicing?*

**Bible Reading:** Jesus said: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." *John 15.11*

## December 7

The holly and the ivy,  
When they are both full grown,  
Of all trees that are in the wood,  
The holly bears the crown:

*O, the rising of the sun,  
And the running of the deer  
The playing of the merry organ,  
Sweet singing in the choir.*

The holly bears a blossom,  
White as the lily flow'r,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ,  
To be our sweet Saviour:

The holly bears a berry,  
As red as any blood,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ,  
To do poor sinners good:

The holly bears a prickle,  
As sharp as any thorn,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ,  
On Christmas Day in the morn:

The holly bears a bark,  
As bitter as any gall,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ,  
For to redeem us all:

The holly and the ivy,  
When they are both full grown,  
Of all trees that are in the wood,  
The holly bears the crown:

Traditional
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Holly and ivy have been used in Christmas decorations for centuries, along with other evergreen plants like rosemary, bay and mistletoe. They would be brought into the house on Christmas Eve (any earlier was thought to be unlucky) and left there either till Twelfth Night (Jan 5) or, in earlier traditions, Candlemas (Feb 2). Robert Herrick's poem from 1648, which starts "*Down with the holly, ivie, all,/ Wherewith ye drest the Christmas hall.*" is titled "Ceremony upon Candlemas Eve". Evergreens provided welcome colour in the gloom of winter, and gave reassurance that life had not been entirely extinguished by the cold. For that reason, they spoke to people of the everlasting love of God, which was with them in the wintry seasons of life just as much as in the summer.

- *Do you decorate your house for Christmas? What do the decorations you use mean to you? Do some of them hold special memories?*
- *Go outside and look around you. What signs of life can you see in nature? What are the special joys of the winter landscape for you?*
- *Think of a "wintry season" in your life. What brought you comfort and reassurance at that time? Were you aware of God with you then, or did he seem completely absent?*

**Bible Reading:** St Paul said: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." *Romans 8.38*

## December 8

Unto us a boy is born!  
King of all creation,  
Came he to a world forlorn,  
The Lord of ev'ry nation.

Cradled in a stall was he  
Watched by cows and asses:  
But the very beasts could see  
That he the world surpasses.

Then the fearful Herod cried  
"pow'r is mine in Jewry!"  
So the blameless children died  
the victims of his fury.

Now may Mary's Son, who came  
Long ago to love us,  
Lead us all with hearts aflame  
Unto the joys above us.

Omega and Alpha he!  
Let the organ thunder  
While the choir with peals of glee  
shall rend the air asunder!

Anon: 15 <sup>th</sup> century trans. Percy Dearmer 1867-1936
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The massacre of the children of Bethlehem by King Herod rarely makes it into our nativity plays, for obvious reasons, but it is a vital part of the story told by Matthew (Matthew 2.16-18). It emphasises the vulnerability of Jesus, who, like all children is at the mercy of forces way beyond his ability to control or even understand. Jesus is born into a world ruled by a despot, Herod, who was notoriously insecure about his position as ruler of Judea; he even had some of his own children killed because he feared their power. Although there is no independent evidence for a massacre in Bethlehem, it is not beyond the realms of possibility; it was the kind of thing that happened, and Matthew must have known this when he wrote his story.

Unlike the rest of the children of Bethlehem, Jesus escaped death on this occasion, taking refuge in Egypt. He would not be so lucky later though. Another Herod, this king's son, was instrumental in the process that condemned him to death on the cross. But the carol reminds us that God was at work, even in this saddest story of "a world forlorn", and that life and love have the last word. Jesus is raised from death. God cannot be defeated by the evil of the world.

- *Watch or listen to the news today. As you hear or see people who are the victims of evil, pray for them, and for the perpetrators of evil.*
- *What do we lose by omitting this dark story from our traditional tellings of the nativity? We may understandably want to protect children from it, but why do we shy away from it as adults, if you think we do?*

**Bible Reading:** Jesus said: "It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble." *Luke 17.2*

## December 9

Once in royal David's city  
stood a lowly cattle shed,  
where a mother laid her baby  
in a manger for his bed:  
Mary was that mother mild,  
Jesus Christ her little child.

He came down to earth from heaven,  
who is God and Lord of all,  
and his shelter was a stable,  
and his cradle was a stall;  
with the poor and mean and lowly,  
lived on earth our Saviour holy.

And, through all his wondrous  
childhood,  
he would honour and obey,  
love and watch the lowly maiden  
in whose gentle arms he lay:  
Christian children all must be  
mild, obedient, good as he.

For he is our childhood's pattern,  
day by day like us he grew;  
he was little, weak and helpless,  
tears and smiles like us he knew,  
and he feelth for our sadness,  
and he shareth in our gladness.

And our eyes at last shall see him,  
through his own redeeming love;  
for that Child so dear and gentle  
is our Lord in heaven above;  
and he leads his children on  
to the place where he is gone.

Not in that poor lowly stable,  
with the oxen standing by,  
we shall see him; but in heaven,  
set at God's right hand on high;  
when like stars his children crowned,  
all in white shall wait around.

Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander 1818-1895

Mrs C. F. Alexander eventually became wife of the Bishop of Armagh, but had already written many hymns and poems for children (including “All things bright and beautiful”) by that time. The infancy she imagines for Jesus is just that, imaginary. We know very little about his childhood, except for the occasion at the age of twelve when he is found by his distraught parents in the Temple; they had set off for home and found him missing – not exactly the “mild, obedient, good” child of the hymn, perhaps?

But Mrs Alexander was certainly right to emphasise the fact that Jesus was a child, with the “tears and smiles” that normal childhood involves. As the second century Christian writer Ireneaus said, Christ became “*what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is himself.*”

- *What kind of child were you (or are you still)? Can you imagine Jesus being the kind of child you were, and having the kind of childhood you had? If not, why not?*
- *Look at the children around you today, with the opportunities and challenges they have. Imagine Christ as one of them.*

**Bible Reading:** Jesus said: “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” *Mark 10.15*

## December 10

Away in a manger,  
no crib for a bed,  
the little Lord Jesus  
laid down his sweet head.  
The stars in the bright sky  
looked down where he lay,  
the little Lord Jesus  
asleep on the hay.

Be near me, Lord Jesus;  
I ask thee to stay  
close by me for ever,  
and love me I pray.  
Bless all the dear children  
in thy tender care,  
and fit us for heaven  
to live with thee there.

The cattle are lowing,  
the baby awakes,  
but little Lord Jesus  
no crying he makes.  
I love thee, Lord Jesus!  
Look down from the sky,  
and stay by my side  
until morning is nigh.

Author uncertain – see below!
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Who wrote this carol? No one is sure. The first two verses seems to have first appeared in the May 1884 issue of *The Myrtle*, a periodical of the Universalist Publishing House in Boston, Massachusetts. They were then printed in an 1885 Lutheran children's hymn book, on the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's death, which may have been why people started attributing the carol to Luther himself. The third verse was added either by William James Kirkpatrick, who first arranged it, or Dr John McFarland. Whatever the truth, it has become staple fare for any children's nativity service or play.

It is a bedtime prayer, a classic lullaby, full of comforting images. The idea that "*the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes*" is rather unrealistic – no real human baby is like that – but perhaps it reflects the universal prayer of tired parents for an undisturbed night's sleep!

It endures, despite its rather saccharine tone, because its central hope is one that is basic to people of all ages; that we are not alone, but watched over by someone who loves us.

- *Do you recall your parents singing lullabies to you? Did you / do you sing lullabies to your own children if you have them?*
- *There is an ancient prayer for those "who watch or wait or weep this night." What has kept you awake at nights? How do you deal with sleeplessness and the fears that often provoke it?*

**Bible Reading:** Cast all your cares on God, because he cares for you.  
1 Peter 5.7

## December 11

God rest you merry, gentlemen,  
Let nothing you dismay,  
For Jesus Christ, our Saviour,  
Was born upon this day  
To save us all from Satan's power  
When we were gone astray.

*O tidings of comfort and joy,  
comfort and joy;  
O tidings of comfort and joy!*

From God our heavenly 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.

Traditional: Probably 18<sup>th</sup> Century

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  
This blessed Babe to find.

But when to Bethlehem they came,  
Whereat this infant lay,  
They found him in a manger  
Where oxen fed on hay;  
His mother Mary, kneeling,  
Unto the Lord did pray.

Now to the Lord sing praises,  
All you within this place,  
And with true love and brotherhood  
Each other now embrace.  
The holy tide of Christmas  
All others doth efface.

The meaning of this carol hangs on a single comma. The first line isn't "God rest you, merry gentlemen", but "God rest you merry, gentlemen". It isn't a plea that merry gentlemen should get some peace, but a prayer that they (and gentlewomen too!) should "rest merry" – "rest assured" might be the nearest modern phrase to this. It celebrates "*tidings of comfort [meaning strength] and joy*", and unpacks those tidings in the rest of the carol. These are ordinary shepherds, isolated out on the hillside, the last to hear any news that circulated in more populated areas, yet this time, the news of Christ's birth comes to them first. And it is good news; God has come into their perilous lives, lives in which they often have to deal with "*tempest, storm and wind*", and have probably often felt they have "*gone astray*" or are under "*Satan's power*". In the final verse, the singers of the carol encourage each other to find and to show God's love to one another so that they can all find good news to sustain them.

- *What is the most dangerous situation you have been in? What happened and how did you deal with it? How did others help you?*
- *What are the "tidings of comfort and joy" for you in the nativity story?*

**Bible Reading:** If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. *Philippians 2.1*

## December 12

In the bleak midwinter,  
frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron,  
water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,  
snow on snow,  
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold Him,  
nor earth sustain;  
Heaven and earth shall flee away  
when he comes to reign.  
In the bleak midwinter  
a stable place sufficed  
The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Enough for him, whom cherubim  
worship night and day,  
a breastful of milk,  
and a mangerful of hay:

enough for him , whom angels  
fall down before,  
the ox and ass and camel which  
adore.

Angels and archangels may have  
gathered there,  
Cherubim and seraphim  
thronged the air;  
But only his mother,  
in her maiden bliss,  
Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give Him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd,  
I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a Wise Man,  
I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give Him:  
give my heart.

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

Christina Rossetti wrote the poem we now sing as a carol for an American monthly magazine, but it wasn't published as a hymn until 1904, after she died. It is sung to two tunes, one by Gustav Holst and the other by Harold Darke (more suitable for choirs than congregations).

In reality we don't know when Jesus was born. The date of Christmas was fixed centuries after his birth at what seemed like the most natural time to celebrate the coming of the Light of the World – at the winter solstice, when the world was at its darkest. Rossetti's snowy, frozen landscape can seem odd for a story set in the Middle East, too, though snow and freezing temperatures are not uncommon in winter there.

Rossetti is painting a picture of tender warmth coming to a world that is desperately in need of it. She contrasts the grandeur of heaven with the simplicity of the stable and the mother's love for her child at the heart of it. We don't need to have great wealth, great status, or great intellect to receive this gift from God, and the best gift we can give in return is our own hearts, as we follow the path this child shows us.

- *“What can I give him?” Do you feel you have anything to give to God, or to the world, through your life? If not, why not?*

**Bible Reading:** When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? *Psalms 8:3-4*



## December 13

The angel Gabriel from heaven came,  
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as  
flame;

"All hail," said he, "thou lowly maiden  
Mary,  
most highly favoured lady," Gloria!

"For know a blessed Mother thou shalt  
be,  
all generations laud and honour thee,  
thy Son shall be Emmanuel, by seers  
foretold,  
most highly favoured lady," Gloria!

traditional Basque carol, paraphrased by Sabine Baring- Gould 1834-1924
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Sabine Baring-Gould was a Devonshire vicar and prolific collector of folk songs, dances and traditions mainly from the West Country. This carol, however, was a paraphrase of a carol from the Basque country (Northern Spain), collected by Charles Bordes.

The carol celebrates the moment in Luke's Gospel (Luke 1.26-38) when Mary is told that she will become the mother of the Messiah, the long promised saviour whom the Jewish people looked for who God would send to them.

It has been a favourite scene for artists over the centuries, and in their various depictions Mary seems to respond with every emotion possible, from joyful welcome to absolute terror.

In the carol, Mary's response is one of humble acceptance. We don't know how she feels. We don't know whether she is worried or overwhelmed. "*To me be as it pleaseth God*" is her answer. She seems to have an absolute trust that if it seems good to God, it will be good. In fact, she will have agony to face as well as joy as her child grows, teaches and eventually dies, so this trust in God will be something she needs to call on often.

- *Have you ever been chosen for something that seemed daunting?*
- *Have you ever not been chosen for something you felt you should be?*
- *Have there been things you've had to face which were not of your choosing? How did you cope?*

**Bible Reading:** "I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans for your welfare not for harm, to give you a future with hope." *Jeremiah 29.11*

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her  
head,

"To me be as it pleaseth God," she  
said,

"my soul shall laud and magnify his  
holy Name."

Most highly favoured lady, Gloria!

Of her, Emmanuel, the Christ, was  
born

in Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,  
and Christian folk throughout the world  
will ever say--

"Most highly favoured lady," Gloria!

## December 14

See him lying on a bed of straw;  
a draughty stable with an open door,  
Mary cradling the babe she bore;  
The prince of glory is his name.

*Oh, now carry me to Bethlehem  
To see the Lord of love again  
Just as poor as was the stable then,  
The prince of glory when he came.*

Star of silver sweep across the skies,  
Show where Jesus in the manger lies.  
Shepherds swiftly from your stupor rise  
To see the Saviour of the world.

Angels, sing again the song you sang,  
sing the glory of God's gracious plan;  
Sing that Beth'lem's little baby can  
Be the saviour of us all.

Mine are riches from your poverty,  
From your innocence, eternity;  
Mine, forgiveness by your death for  
me,  
Child of sorrow for my joy.

Michael Perry, 1942-1996
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Not all popular carols are ancient (and you may have been surprised by earlier carols in this series that aren't as old as they seem, like "Ding Dong Merrily", written in 1924). Every "traditional carol" was new once, of course, and this favourite of many, sometimes known as the Calypso Carol, was written in 1965. Although the title might make it sound as if it should be West Indian, it was written by an Englishman, Michael Perry, when he was at Oak Hill Theological College, training for ministry. He wrote it for a college carol concert, but it was somehow picked up by Cliff Richard, and used to fill a gap in a carol programme he was presenting. The rest is history. Michael Perry went on to be one of our most prolific modern hymn writers, and ended up as vicar of St Peter and St Paul, Tonbridge.

The carol is a joyful evocation of the scene in the stable. Mary, shepherds and angels gather around to wonder at this child, the prince of glory. But the point of the carol is that they aren't the only ones invited to kneel at the manger. The chorus is a prayer for all those who sing it. "Oh, now carry me to Bethlehem..." This carol stands in an ancient tradition of imaginative engagement with Biblical scenes; St Francis built Christmas cribs so that people could imagine what it might have been like to be there, and countless artists have tried to help us be part of Jesus' birth.

- *Imagine yourself in the scene. Where are you? Hovering by the door, or right in the centre of the action?*
- *What do you feel and what do you want to say and do?*

**Bible Reading:** Jesus' mother treasured all these things in her heart.  
*Luke 2.51*

## December 15

Hark, the herald-angels sing  
glory to the new-born King,  
peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled.  
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,  
join the triumph of the skies;  
with the angelic host proclaim,  
'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'

*Hark, the herald-angels sing  
glory to the new-born King.*

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 man to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.

Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace:  
hail, the Sun of Righteousness.  
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,  
born to give them second birth.

Charles Wesley 1707-88, George Whitfield 1714-70, Martin Madan 1726-90, and others.
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This carol has been much altered since Charles Wesley originally wrote it (with ten verses! and a request that it be set to a solemn tune. It's probably just as well that others got their hands on it and changed it, reducing the verses to the three we know, and giving it the upbeat tune to which it is now sung, written by Mendelssohn.

It is a celebration of the Incarnation, the belief that in Christ we see God's very essence. That essence may be "*veiled in flesh*" but that does not lessen its glory. The truly wonderful thing, according to Wesley, is that Jesus' birth changes everything, giving us "*second birth*". We receive a new start in his love; we are reconciled to God and to one another. His resurrection will defeat death for us all. He is the one who will show us that nothing can separate us from God's love, and it all starts here, as "*Christ is born in Bethlehem*".

- *Wesley celebrates reconciliation, the bringing together of God and humanity, of people with one another. Where in your life do you need reconciliation this Advent? Are there people you have fallen out with? Have you fallen out with God?*
- *What is the "second birth", the new start you long for?*

**Bible Reading:** St Paul said: "Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made Jews and Gentiles into one, and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." *Ephesians 2.14*

## December 16

See amid the winter's snow,  
born for us on earth below,  
see, the tender Lamb appears,  
promised from eternal years.

*Hail thou ever blessèd morn,  
hail redemption's happy dawn,  
sing through all Jerusalem:  
Christ is born in Bethlehem.*

Lo, within a manger lies  
he who built the starry skies;  
he who, throned in height sublime,  
sits amid the cherubim.

Say, ye holy shepherds, say,  
what your joyful news today.  
wherefore have ye left your sheep  
on the lonely mountain steep?

"As we watched at dead of night,  
lo, we saw a wondrous light;  
angels singing 'Peace on earth'  
told us of the Saviour's birth."

Sacred Infant, all divine,  
what a tender love was thine,  
thus to come from highest bliss  
down to such a world as this.

Teach, O teach us Holy Child,  
By thy face so meek and mild,  
Teach us to resemble thee,  
In thy sweet humility

Edward Caswell 1814 -1878
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Edward Caswell's carol, originally called "A Hymn for Christmas Day" is written for the "*blessed morn*" of the chorus' first line. It celebrates the moment when hope dawns, when something happens that changes everything. As the carol points out, though, what has happened is very small and apparently fragile; a tender lamb, a sacred infant, something so tiny that it fits in a manger. Yet in the birth of that baby, as vulnerable and helpless as all babies are, "*he who built the starry skies*" comes into the mess of earth, "*down to such a world as this*".

The carol finishes with a reminder that this "*blessed morn*" was not simply a one-day wonder, though. The birth of Christ is beginning of the building of a new kingdom of love and justice, in which we all have our part to play. "*Teach us to resemble thee, in thy sweet humility*". We are invited to lay down our delusions of grandeur and see ourselves as God's children, with a lifetime of learning and growing to do.

- *Can you recall times when your life has changed for the better in a moment, when a "blessed morn" has dawned for you in something that looked quite small and insignificant at the time?*
- *What does "humility" mean to you? How might it be seen in your life?*

**Bible Reading:** Weeping may linger for the night: but joy comes with the morning. *Psalms 30.5*

## December 17

Angels, from the realms of glory,  
wing your flight o'er all the earth;  
ye who sang creation's story,  
now proclaim Messiah's birth:  
*Gloria, in excelsis Deo*  
*Gloria, in excelsis Deo*

Shepherds in the field abiding,  
watching o'er your flocks by night,  
God with man is now residing;  
yonder shines the infant Light:

James Montgomery 1771 -1854

Sages, leave your contemplations;  
brighter visions beam afar:  
seek the great desire of nations;  
ye have seen his natal star:

Saints before the altar bending,  
watching long in hope and fear,  
suddenly the Lord, descending,  
in his temple shall appear:

Though an infant now we view him,  
He shall fill his Father's throne,  
Gather all the nations to him  
Every knee shall then bow down.

James Montgomery was a Scottish poet, the child of a Moravian pastor. He became the editor of a Sheffield newspaper, called the *Sheffield Iris*, but although he wrote thought provoking articles, he never really had much of a head for business, and eventually had to sell the paper. He was a passionate campaigner, however, both for the abolition of slavery and the end of the exploitation of child chimney sweeps. It was a time of political repression, however, and his views sometimes got him into trouble; he was twice imprisoned for sedition, although he ended his life very highly respected. He wrote a number of hymns, including "Hail to the Lord's anointed" and "Stand up and bless the Lord".

Perhaps it is especially appropriate that a newspaper man should be best known for a carol about angels, God's messengers (the Greek "*angellos*" literally means "*messenger*"). In the carol we are taken, as if on the angels' wings, on a guided tour of those to whom the news of Christ's birth is announced. Shepherds, sages, and saints witness the birth of Christ. This is good news, for them and for us.

- *How did your first interest in Christian faith begin? Were there people or circumstances which drew you towards it?*
- *How can you be good news to others today, in your words and deeds – the "angel" which brings them the message they need to hear?*

**Bible Reading:** How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' *Isaiah 52.7*

## December 18

Little Jesus, sweetly sleep, do not stir;  
We will lend a coat of fur.  
We will rock you, rock you, rock you,  
We will rock you, rock you, rock you.  
See the fur to keep you warm,  
Snugly 'round your tiny form.

Mary's little baby, sleep, sweetly sleep,  
Sleep in comfort, slumber deep.  
We will rock you, rock you, rock you,  
We will rock you, rock you, rock you.  
We will serve you all we can,  
Darling, darling little man.

Traditional Czech, translated by Percy Dearmer 1867-1936

This carol is a translation of a traditional Czech carol by Percy Dearmer. It has the form of a lullaby. There was a medieval tradition in parts of Northern Europe (particularly Germany) to set up a cradle in Church, with the figure of the baby Jesus in it, which the priests and people would rock as they sang lullabies to the child Jesus. Rather like our Crib services, this enabled people imaginatively to enter into the story of the birth of Christ. This carol may have its origins in this practice.

The carol evokes the scene of the birth of Christ as if the singers were there, able to be involved in the action. It imagines that the onlookers could give a fur blanket to wrap around the baby to protect him from the cold, if not from all the other dangers he faces. Some people find it sentimental, but it taps into the natural protective instincts we have towards babies, and it emphasizes the vulnerability of this child, born in an animal shelter, with not even a warm cot to lie in. That vulnerability will be evident later when he dies on the cross. This is not some superman, who feels no pain or fear.

- *Christmas is a season filled with traditions which help us imagine the scene of the birth of Christ. What traditions do you observe or value at Christmas at home or at church? Do you have crib set, or favourite tree decorations which depict the story? If not, could you make or buy some this year?*
- *Spend some time imagining the scene this carol depicts. If you were there and could say something to Mary and Joseph or do something for them, what would it be?*

**Bible Reading:** Then Simeon blessed Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' *Luke 2.34-35*

## December 19

While shepherds watched their flocks  
by night,  
all seated on the ground,  
the angel of the Lord came down,  
and glory shone around.

"Fear not," said he, for mighty dread  
had seized their troubled mind;  
"Glad tidings of great joy I bring  
to you and all mankind.

"To you, in David's town, this day  
is born of David's line  
a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord;  
and this shall be the sign:

The heavenly Babe you there shall find  
to human view displayed,  
all meanly wrapped in swathing bands,  
and in a manger laid."

Thus spake the seraph, and forthwith  
appeared a shining throng  
of angels praising God, who thus  
addressed their joyful song:

"All glory be to God on high  
and to the earth be peace;  
good will henceforth from heaven to  
men  
begin and never cease."

Nahum Tate (1652-1715)
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This carol was one of the earliest to receive official approval by the Anglican Church after the Reformation. Hymns not drawn directly from Bible texts were regarded with suspicion, but this follows Luke's account of the Nativity very closely, so it was permitted. We usually sing it to "*Old Winchester*", but it was often sung to "*Old Foster*" – the choir will be singing this setting at the carol service on 21<sup>st</sup> Dec at 6.30pm – or "*Cranbrook*", better known today as "*Ilkla Moor Baht 'at*."

Shepherds were important economically and symbolically to Israel; both Moses and King David had been shepherds and God was often likened to one. However, shepherds were often regarded as rather disreputable, unable to keep the rituals and practices a good Jewish person should as they moved around with their flocks and lived in the open. It's no accident, therefore, that they feature in the story of Christ's birth. Their presence at the manger crib points forward to the kind of ministry Jesus would have among people marginalised by his society, and the value he placed on them.

- *The angel says "Fear not". What do you think the shepherds were afraid of?*
- *Who do you think would least expect to hear that the Good News was for them today, and would struggle most to believe it?*

**Bible Reading:** God will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. *Isaiah 40.11*

## December 20

We three kings of Orient are,  
bearing gifts we traverse afar,  
field and fountain, moor and mountain,  
following yonder star.

*O star of wonder, star of night,  
star with royal beauty bright;  
westward leading, still proceeding,  
guide us to thy perfect light!*

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain,  
gold I bring to crown him again,  
King for ever, ceasing never  
over us all to reign.

John Henry Hopkins 1820-1891

Frankincense to offer have I:  
incense owns a Deity nigh;  
prayer and praising, all men raising,  
worship him, God Most High.

Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume  
breathes a life of gathering gloom;  
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,  
sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

Glorious now behold him arise,  
King and God and Sacrifice;  
heaven sings alleluia; alleluia  
the earth replies.

John Henry Hopkins, rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Williamsport, Pennsylvania wrote both words and music of this carol for a Christmas Pageant. Each of the central three verses is intended as a solo, with the singer explaining the significance of the gift he has brought and pointing to the future ministry of Jesus as “King and God and Sacrifice”.

In fact almost all of the carol is guess work, embroidering on the brief account in Matthew’s Gospel from which it is drawn. Matthew simply tells us that some (number unspecified) Magi (Zoroastrian astrologers, not Kings) come to visit Jesus, bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Matthew’s account of the nativity, like Luke’s is really an imaginative introduction to the later ministry of Jesus and points to its main themes.

Matthew tells us about these foreign visitors. Their culture and belief system is very different, yet they recognise the presence of God in this child. Matthew wants to highlight that Jesus message is for all people, whatever their background or culture. He cannot be “owned” by any one nation or group.

- *Have you ever worshipped or lived alongside others – Christian or of other faiths – whose beliefs or ways of worship are very different from yours. How did it make you feel?*
- *When the Magi returned to their own lands, how do you think they might have been changed by their visit?*

**Bible Reading:** There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. *Galatians 3.29*



## December 21

Good King Wenceslas looked out  
On the feast of Stephen  
When the snow lay round about  
Deep and crisp and even  
Brightly shone the moon that night  
Though the frost was cruel  
When a poor man came in sight  
Gath'ring winter fuel

"Hither, page, and stand by me  
If thou know'st it, telling  
Yonder peasant, who is he?  
Where and what his dwelling?"

"Sire, he lives a good league hence  
Underneath the mountain  
Right against the forest fence  
By Saint Agnes' fountain."

"Bring me flesh and bring me wine  
Bring me pine logs hither  
Thou and I will see him dine  
When we bear him thither."

Page and monarch forth they went  
Forth they went together  
Through the rude wind's wild lament  
And the bitter weather

"Sire, the night is darker now  
And the wind blows stronger  
Fails my heart, I know not how,  
I can go no longer."

"Mark my footsteps, my good page  
Tread thou in them boldly  
Thou shalt find the winter's rage  
Freeze thy blood less coldly."

In his master's steps he trod  
Where the snow lay dinted  
Heat was in the very sod  
Which the Saint had printed  
Therefore, Christian men, be sure  
Wealth or rank possessing  
Ye who now will bless the poor  
Shall yourselves find blessing.

John Mason Neale 1818-1866
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Neale published this carol in 1853. He was an Anglican priest who had been much affected by the High Church "Oxford Movement". He co-founded an Anglican order of nuns, the Sisters of St Margaret, who still work with marginalised people around the world..

The carol retells a legend about Wenceslaus I, Duke of Bohemia, (907-935) who was made a saint because of his reputation for goodness.

Whether there is any truth to the story in the carol no one knows, but it reminds us of one of the central messages of Christ, that his followers are called to serve others, and that worldly rank has no significance in the kingdom of God. The carol is very much of its time, however. There is no challenge to the structural inequality which leads to a king and a peasant having such different lives!

- *How important is it to you that your celebration of Christmas should include some charitable giving? Is it an assumption you grew up with?*
- *What might make it difficult for us to resist the urge to over spend and over consume at Christmas? How can we make it fairer for everyone?*

**Bible Reading** : What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? *Micah 6.8*

## December 22

The first Nowell the angel did say  
was to certain poor shepherds in fields as  
they lay;  
in fields where they lay, keeping their  
sheep,  
on a cold winter's night that was so deep.  
*Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell,*  
*born is the King of Israel.*

They looked up and saw a star  
shining in the east beyond them far,  
and to the earth it gave great light,  
and so it continued both day and night.

And by the light of that same star  
three wise men came from country far;  
to seek for a king was their intent,  
and to follow the star wherever it went.

This star drew nigh to the northwest,  
o'er Bethlehem it took its rest,  
and there it did both stop and stay  
right over the place where Jesus lay.

Then entered in those wise men three  
full reverently upon their knee,  
and offered there in his presence  
their gold, and myrrh, and frankincense.

Then let us all with one accord  
sing praises to our heavenly Lord;  
that hath made heaven and earth of  
naught,  
and with his blood mankind hath bought.

Text collected by William Sandys c. 1833
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This traditional carol was first collected in the form we know it today in Cornwall in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The “*Nowell*” of the chorus may derive from the French “Noël”, meaning *Christmas*, from the Latin “*natalis*” – birth. Some sources suggest, however, that it means “*News*” (as in *novel*). Perhaps we can read it both ways; Christ’s birth is good news, and it is this news that is the cause of our celebration!

Although the carol starts with the shepherds, it mostly tells the story of the wise men, who see the light of a new star in the sky and follow it to Bethlehem. It was a common belief in the ancient world that a star would appear in the sky when a person of significance was born. In Matthew’s Gospel the star doesn’t move, as the carol suggests, but having appeared over the place where the wise men come from, it appears again to them over Bethlehem as confirmation that they are in the right place. It must seem an unlikely place to them – an ordinary house, with an ordinary family living in it, but they realise somehow that God has appeared in this ordinary child. Christmas seems like a special time for us, but the essence of the story is that God comes into the ordinariness of the world.

- *Has an ordinary day, or an ordinary person, ever turned out to be far more significant than you thought?*
- *When all the glitter and magic of Christmas has passed, how will you seek for God’s presence in your everyday life, and try to grow in faith?*

**Bible Reading:** Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!” *Genesis 28.16*

## December 23

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.*

God of God, Light of Light,  
lo! he abhors not the Virgin's womb;  
Very God, begotten, not created:

See how the shepherds,  
Summoned to his cradle  
Leaving their flocks, draw nigh with  
lowly fear  
We too will thither  
bend our joyful footsteps:

Lo! Star-led chieftains,  
Magi, Christ adoring  
Offer him incense, gold and myrrh  
We to the Christ Child  
Bring our hearts oblations

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in  
exultation,  
sing, all ye citizens of heaven above;  
glory to God, glory in the highest;

*For Christmas Day*  
Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this  
happy morning;  
Jesus, to thee be glory given;  
Word of the Father, now in flesh  
appearing;

origin unknown trans. John Francis Wade 1711-1786
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This carol, originally in Latin (*Adeste Fidelis*) has been attributed to many authors, from a Portuguese king, to a group of Cistercian monks, to St Bonaventura. It may, however, have been an original composition in Latin by John Francis Wade (1711 –1786) a Catholic hymn writer. We shall probably never know!

It's a carol that is full of movement, as the various characters in the Christmas story come to the scene of Christ's birth.. The emphasis of the carol, though is that this is not just something that happened long ago and far away, but movement we are also called to join in with. "*We too will thither bend our joyful footsteps*". Christ was not just born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, but is also born now, in our world and in our lives. If we want to be part of the kingdom of God, says this carol, we need to be prepared to be on the move. If we seek him we will find him today in prayer, in one another and in those in need whom we are called to serve.

- *Looking back at your life, how have you had to move (geographically, emotionally and spiritually) in it? Are you the same person now that you were a decade ago?*
- *How has your faith changed over the years?*

**Bible Reading:** Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' *John 8.12*

## December 24

Silent night, holy night,  
all is calm, all is bright  
round yon virgin mother and child.  
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,  
sleep in heavenly peace.  
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night,  
shepherds quake at the sight,  
glories stream from heaven afar,  
heavenly hosts sing alleluia;  
Christ, the Saviour, is born!  
Christ, the Saviour, is born!

Silent night, holy night,  
Son of God, love's pure light  
radiant beams from thy holy face,  
with the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord at thy birth.  
Jesus, Lord at thy birth.

Joseph Mohr 1792-1848 trans. John Freeman Young 1820-1885
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The famous legend about the writing of this carol – that mice had chewed through the organ bellows, so that a new carol was needed which could be accompanied on the guitar– is sadly a complete myth. The carol was first sung to the guitar however, at the Midnight Mass in Oberndorf, Austria, in 1818. The words were written by the local priest, Joseph Mohr, and the music by schoolmaster and organist, Franz Gruber. The other story about this song – that it was sung simultaneously in German, French and English by WW1 soldiers during the “Christmas Truce” in 1914 WW1 does appear to be true though. Perhaps the words reminded the soldiers of their common humanity. Not everyone thought this was a good idea. Christmas Truces were suppressed as the war went on; it was harder to kill people if you saw them as equally human.

If yesterday's carol (O come all ye faithful) was all about movement, this one is marked by its stillness. It is as if the whole of creation is transfixed for a moment by the birth of Christ, simply watching and wondering as the light of God shines out into the world through him. There is nothing to be said or done. This is a moment simply to be aware of the love of God, which cannot be earned or worked for, but is freely given in this child, who calls us all to live in peace. John's Gospel calls him the “Word of God”, and this carol invites us simply to listen to what he is saying to us tonight.

- *How will you be marking Christmas? Will it include some time for worship, and perhaps for quiet contemplation amidst all the hustle and busyness?*
- *If Jesus is God's Word to the world, what is he saying to you right now? Where do you need to seek peace and reconciliation in your life?*

**Bible Reading:** “We love, because God first loved us.” 1 John 4.19