

A Season of Song

A series of seasonal meditations from John Rackley

Sunday 27 December 2020 (1st Sunday of Christmas)

*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.*

Attributed to various authors from the 17th-18th centuries, originally written in Latin.
(*Singing the Faith*, 212)

There are only two Sundays in the Christmas calendar and *O come all ye faithful* is my first choice. It does what a good carol should. It tells the story. It has a fabulous tune. It fills me with delight. It draws me into worship in ways that few other hymns can or do.

But what of the second verse?

*True God of True God,
Light of Light eternal,
Lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father,
Begotten, not created.*

Notice all the words in 'upper case'. What's going on here? It stands out from the other verses. They tell the story of the shepherds, star-led chieftains and angels and we are encouraged to clothe ourselves in their welcome. We are given a place to stand in the story.

But what's all this about 'begotten, not created'?

To answer this, we need to go back over 1000 years to three centuries after the birth of Jesus.

For a long time, Christian scholars had been getting into a great debate over who Jesus really was. In 325, a conference of Christian leaders decided on the Nicene Creed. It declared that Christ was begotten, not made. He was divine, for he is of one being with God. He was 100% divine and 100% human. This made him unique.

They used the word 'begotten' deliberately because it describes him as a special expression of God. It means 'brought into existence' – True God of True God. It is 'to be fathered' – Light of Light eternal. It means more than another word they could have used: a word which we know as 'created'.

'Begotten' means that Jesus Christ was not another of God's creations like a fish or a tree or an emperor. The creed is saying something very important and, in its way, 'subversive'. Jesus is not just another important person like a politician or military leader or someone like an emperor who in those days might be thought of as divine. Jesus is not just one Lord among a lot of other Lords.

Today that may all seem somewhat 'back then' and all about the influence of Greek thinking on the way Christian thought about Jesus. Except...

Since Jesus is begotten and not created, and whether or not we use such language for his distinctiveness questions how we see our allegiance to him.

In this wonderful old carol, there resides a stunning conviction. It is the conviction that the baby born to Mary questions everything we count as important because he is begotten not created. He is 'begotten' and therefore God of God and Lord over all.

In this world there are many lords – of culture, political systems, family loyalties, recreation, business and churches. So, is Jesus above these lords in our priorities or is he one allegiance among a number of allegiances? Is our allegiance to Jesus only in the religious realm or beyond?

Is Jesus our Lord of all?

These questions are not academic.

Some Christians felt unable to join in the 'Bow the Knee' movement because there is only one to whom we should the knee. Were they being contrarian or making a valid point?

Some Christians withhold their taxes to the extent that they pay for armaments which by conviction they cannot support. Are they making trouble or bowing the knee to the Lord of heaven and earth and not the war-lords of militarism?

It is not just an academic exercise to wonder about the pecking order of the various allegiances we have. There are powerful forces which constantly influence and shape our lives. Where does our Christian allegiance fit in?

It is important at this time of the year to sing carols and enjoy them. And I am tempted to think that it's only one verse after all and Christmas only comes once a year.

But once was quite enough for Herod who:

*Then with fear was filled:
'A prince' he said, 'in Jewry'.
All the little boys he killed
At Bethlem in his fury.*

Percy Dearmer, based on a medieval song.
(*Singing the Faith*, 218)

Heard knew a threat when he heard of one. He and his Roman masters could not tolerate opposition. It had to be eliminated. There is a troubling side to Christ and we cannot escape it, as neither could he.

*Truth of our life,
Mary's child,
You tell us God is good;
Prove it is true,
Mary's child,
Go to your cross of wood.*

Geoffrey Ainger.
(*Singing the Faith*, 193)

Prayer:

God of mystery and wonder,
Show us where we are not true
to our faith in Christ
And grant us the courage
to live the faith of the carols we sing.
Amen.