

**Sing it Like you Mean It! Confessing the Carols**

**O Come All Ye Faithful – Psalm 149, Heb 1:1-4**

Well brothers and sisters, I can't believe how fast this year has gone by, while at the same time not going by fast enough! So, its been a rather strange passing of time that has brought us here to the start of December 2020 and our preparations to celebrate Christmas in these pandemic circumstances.

And if the passing of time has seemed strange this year – then certainly our preparations to celebrate Christmas will be doubly strange as we are not able to prepare for many of the traditional ways of celebrating - and we must find new ways to be together while we are apart.

But in the midst of all the uncertainty, there are some things that never change and we may find some small comfort in the fact that not even a global pandemic can stop... Christmas music.

In fact, our current circumstances might even be responsible for an unseasonably early start of this annual musical tradition. Just a couple weeks ago, in mid November, I was out in the mall and I noticed, that while the mall staff hadn't begun to set up the Christmas decorations, yet... I could hear the familiar strains of Christmas music already being played in the background.

And as we start to count down the days to Dec 25<sup>th</sup> these familiar songs and carols will be played with increasing repetition on the radio and tv and start showing up in our social media posts – I've already seen some of you post your favorite Pentatonix Christmas carol online!

So, it's a good thing that this aspect of our Christmas celebrations is able to continue unaffected for the most part this year – though we may not be able to gather to sing them together in close quarters – at least we can still listen to these songs and sing them by ourselves or in our family bubbles.

Now I don't know about you, but I often wonder if people actually think about and pay attention to what they are singing when they sing these songs? And if they really understand what the words are about?

Especially when I hear famous singers doing traditional carols on their Christmas albums – I'm thinking to myself *"do you realize what you are singing? Do know what you are actually saying? And if you do... is this just another song that you're singing... or do you actually believe it?"*

And I wonder that for a lot of people... people who I know will gladly sing carols at Christmas time, with their family or at a Christmas Eve service – because these are seasonal songs.

But brothers and sisters have we ever taken the time to consider exactly what it is we are singing – do we understand the words and what they mean and do we actually believe it?

So this year – as we attempt to prepare for what we might or might not be able to do for celebrating Christmas together –

we're going to take a closer look at some of the classic Christmas carols, and dig into what we're confessing when we sing these songs... to make sure that they aren't becoming just something we do for the Christmas season, that we put away like the rest of the decorations when its all over.

Because when we sing something – we're singing it because it means something, its really important, and we believe it and we need to express it somehow in a way that goes beyond just saying it – we want to be able to sing it like we mean it.

So, we going to take a closer look at the classic carol, O Come All Ye Faithful this morning, so that when we're finished digging into it, we're really going to be able to sing it like we mean it. Amen?!

Ok, so a little historical research on this Christmas Carol reveals that we aren't exactly certain who wrote or composed it. It was originally written in Latin, and titled *Adeste Fideles*, and there is some speculation that it could have been written by St. Bonaventure who lived during the late 1200's or the

Portuguese King John the 4<sup>th</sup> in the early to mid 1600's. The general consensus for the lyrics however seems to favor authorship by anonymous Cistercian monks prior to 1640.

This is because two manuscript copies of this carol dated from 1640 were discovered at the palace of King John the 4<sup>th</sup> in Vila Vicoso, and these are the earliest copies of this carol that have been discovered, and they are why some people believe that King John was responsible for composing the melody of carol, if not the lyrics.

But while most believe that the monks wrote the lyrics, scholars have speculated that tune may have been composed by such musicians as John Reading (1600's) Handel (1700's) Gluck (1700's) Marcos Portugal (1700's) or Thomas Arne (1700's)

However, most of the hymnbooks and sheet music that we would be familiar with, list a John Francis Wade as the author and composer of this carol, even though the earliest printed

version published by Wade is dated in 1751 which is over a hundred years after the manuscripts of King John the 4<sup>th</sup>.

John Francis Wade was a copyist of musical manuscripts, we take it for granted today that we can just print off copies of sheet music from the computer – but back in the day this often had to be done by hand. It is thought that Wade often signed his copies, because his calligraphy was so beautiful that his clients requested this. In 1751 he published a printed compilation of his manuscript copies, which is the first published copy of the carol and this is how this hymn was attributed to his authorship, though that is likely incorrect.

The original carol had only four verses, but in the late 1700's the hymn had grown to a total of eight, three of them authored by Jean-François-Étienne Borderies, a French Priest, with the 8<sup>th</sup> verse appearing anonymously.

The English text that we are familiar with singing today came about another ninety years later in 1841 when Frederick

Oakeley, an English Catholic priest, translated the original four verses from Latin into English.

And So there really aren't any special historical circumstance surrounding the composition of this carol, it's basically just a straightforward song about the birth of Christ with references to familiar events from the Christmas story, but... that doesn't mean digging into the lyrics won't yield some deeper insights for us, especially if we utilize the scriptures as a benchmark of interpretation.

So when I sat down and began to take a closer look at the lyrics, starting with verse 1 my first question was - who are the "faithful" that are being exhorted to come to Bethlehem? Would this be referring to the invitation of the shepherds as they went and told everyone they could find about birth of the Messiah that night? Would they be calling the "faithful"?

Well perhaps... but it would be a bit ironic that the shepherds would be calling the "faithful" considering that shepherds had a bit of a reputation for being somewhat unreliable in this

matter, and the invitation to come to Bethlehem seems redundant because they were already in Bethlehem. So I'm not sure the "faithful" refers to that...

And then I was thinking – well maybe this is addressed to those who are singing it, we are supposed to be the "faithful" who are to be joyful and triumphant and go to Bethlehem – but if that is the case what does it mean to be faithful?

Regular attendance and participation in the life of the Church? Maybe... but when these lyrics were written over 380 years ago there would have been a considerable difference in what constituted a faithful church attendance and participation so I'm not sure that gives us much substance to work with.

But if we start looking up "faithful" in the scriptures then we find a whole lot of references... especially in the Psalms, to God's "faithful people" let me read a few of them for you. Psalm 30:4 – *"Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people; praise his holy name."*

Psalm 132:9 - *May your priests be clothed with your righteousness; may your faithful people sing for joy.*”

Psalm 132:16 – *“I will clothe her priests with salvation, and her faithful people will ever sing for joy.”*

Psalm 145:10 – *“All your works praise you, Lord; your faithful people extol you.”*

So, from these scriptures we can see that the “faithful” are those who praise and worship God as He has instructed them to do in His covenant relationship with them – that’s why they are faithful.

But the last two references to faithful people in the Psalms expand on this a bit and help us understand why the faithful are also *“joyful and triumphant.”*

Let me read Ps 149:5-9 for you. It says *“Let his faithful people rejoice in this honor and sing for **joy** on their beds. <sup>6</sup> May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands, <sup>7</sup> to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, <sup>8</sup> to bind their kings with fetters,*

*their nobles with shackles of iron, <sup>9</sup> to carry out the sentence written against them— this is the glory of all his faithful people.”*

Now I know this sounds a bit odd to us, that the glory, the privilege of God’s faithful people is to carry out God’s judgement against the nations, but is very much part of being God’s chosen people. Paul picks up on this in 1 Cor 6:2 where he says *“Or do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world?”*

Now in the Old Testament this judging aspect of being part of God’s faithful people was tied to the arrival of the promised Messiah, and while there are many Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, the ones that were more popular with God’s people were the prophecies that focused on the vengeance, deliverance and political freedom and peace that the Messiah would bring.

Like what we find in Isaiah 9:6-7 which says *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his*

*shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever."*

There are wonderful amazing promises, and its easy to see then why the faithful are joyful and triumphant as they come to Bethlehem where it had been foretold by the prophet Micah that the promised Messiah who would accomplish all this amazing political reality for them would be born.

So – all this exploration helps us to understand that the opening verse in this carol is all about God's covenant people and the messianic promises being fulfilled as the messiah is born in Bethlehem.

Now the next line is also rather interesting – Born the King of Angels. You would think that after all the emphasis on being the Messiah that the lyrics would highlight being born the King

of Israel, so what is this line about being the king of angels? We certainly want to understand this better than just thinking it kind of sounds like something good to say about Jesus right?

So, let's turn to Heb 1:5 where it says *"For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"?"*

Now again, if you are up on your covenant studies, you'll remember that the term "son of God" as it is quoted here in Hebrews from Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel is not about the fact that Jesus is fully divine – but it's a title in the covenant of Kingship for the King of God's people.

So, when the Messiah is born, as King of God's people – drawing upon what is said in Heb 1:5 this carol proclaims the Messiah is also born King of the Angels.

And the appropriate response then is outlined in the chorus that is repeated after every verse – *oh come let us adore him –*

let us worship and praise him because that is what God's faithful people do for their God and for the one whom their God has chosen, or anointed. And who is that? Well it is Christ – which literally means the chosen or anointed one... Christ the Lord.

So, let's move on to verse 2 which actually does deal with the nature of Jesus Christ as being fully divine. Now unfortunately verse 2 does not get sung very often because its lyrics are more theological and they don't flow very well for singing in their translation from the Latin.

But the phrase God of God comes to us from Heb 1 again, in vs. 3 where it says *"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being,"* and Light of Light comes from John 1:9 where it says *"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world."* Then just a few verses later in John 1 we have that well known verse 14 which states *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."*

This is the basis upon which the phrase "Lo he abhors not the virgin's womb" comes from. This is how the word became flesh, and he did not consider it beneath him to become incarnate. Which reminds us of Philippians 2:7-8 where Paul says to us that Christ *"he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."*

Then we go back to John 1 again as we sing the next phrase "Very God, Begotten, not created" which is based on John 1:1 *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* And the relationship between the Word and God is not a relationship of creator and creature, because they are both God – but the Word comes from God, the Word is begotten by God – but not created by God. This is deep theology here – we should try to sing it more often so we get into it.

So, the second verse of this carol is all about Jesus' divinity as He incarnated at His birth – which is amazing when we stop to consider it. That the Word humbled himself to become one of us – in order to save us.

So again, the only proper response is to come and adore him, and to confess that this baby is God's anointed one and is actually God Almighty laying in the manger.

Now the third verse of this carol is addressed to the Angels and the citizens of heaven and they are being exhorted to sing, and specifically sing "glory to God, all glory in the highest." So, it's pretty obvious that this verse is referencing Luke 2:13-14 where the angels appear to the shepherds "praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven." Those are the exact words of scripture.

Now considering everything that has been packed into the previous two verses of this carol, it would seem to be a bit anticlimactic for this third verse to only be referring to the angel choirs that appeared to the shepherds – as amazing as that was.

So maybe consider.. and notice that when we sing this.. we are exhorting the angels and the citizens of heaven to sing in the present tense – not the past tense... we are exhorting

them to continue praising God and giving glory to God in the highest – in the present and in the future.

And that draws from the reality of Rev 5:16 where we see this praise continues on. John writes "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. (the other citizens of heaven) In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

So when we sing this verse and it takes our thoughts back to when the angels sang to announce Christ's birth – it should also take us forward to remember that the angels continue to sing praise and give glory to Christ as He has ascended to the highest heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and that we are joining in with that praise and worship as we respond with the chorus once again, adoring Christ, the Lamb of God, seated in heaven as the Lord over all.



And so, we come to the fourth verse of the carol – “Yea Lord we greet thee born this happy morning” So what is going on here? I mean scripturally we know that Jesus was born at night, so is this phrase talking about the tradition of celebrating Jesus’ birth with a Christmas morning service? Or is this a technicality that part of the night is really the early morning?

And then the song seems to repeat itself with the phrase “Word of the Father now in flesh appearing” Didn’t we just cover that in the second verse as it referred to the incarnation in John 1:14? Did the authors feel the need to include this because they figured we would normally skip out on singing the second verse?

Perhaps... but what if this last verse was crafted in a similar manner to verse three where in reflecting back on Christmas events we are also looking forward... and in this case as this carol comes to an end the authors want to have us begin anticipating the Easter Resurrection?

Remembering how Mary encountered the risen and reborn Christ on the easter Sunday morning, the early church worshiped the Lord on Sunday mornings to commemorate His resurrection, and we still worship on Sunday morning for that reason.

“Jesus to thee be all glory given” when Jesus was resurrected, he received a glorified body as befitting the Word of the Father, but He was still human – as He appeared to the disciples in the flesh, taking something to eat from them... (Luke 24:39-42) “Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.”

And perhaps there is also some anticipation of the day when Christ will return in this verse as well, when we will see him as Paul says “*face to face*” (1 Cor 13:12)

Which brings us to the chorus again where we worship Christ – this time perhaps with the words of Philippians 2:11 echoing as we sing... “*that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father!*”

So, let's do a quick recap of what we've covered in these four verses of O Come all Ye Faithful, so we can summarize what we are confessing when we sing it.

Verse 1 – Is about God's covenant people and the fulfilment of covenant promises in the birth of the Messiah.

Verse 2 – Is about the Incarnation, God becomes human, this baby is God in the flesh.

Verse 3 – Is remembering the angels singing praise in the past which reminds us that they are still singing praise to Jesus in Heaven in the present.

Verse 4 – Is remembering that the birth of Jesus points ahead to the resurrection of Jesus and His return

And for what we confess to be true as we sing each verse, the only appropriate response is what we sing in the chorus; to come and adore the Christ... to worship Christ our Lord.

And now that we've got a deeper more profound understanding of what this Christmas carol is all about – I think the only appropriate thing to do is get the band back up

here – so that we can praise and worship Christ as Lord by singing this Christmas Carol to Him in adoration.

Are you ready? Sing it like you mean it brothers and sisters!