

Study 4 : O Holy Child of Bethlehem

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel

The great glad tidings tell

The Christmas story is not one that can be ignored, much as the world would like to by focussing on commercial rather than spiritual possibilities. God brings Grace through this Holy Child of Bethlehem as a gift to a graceless world. The author Philip Yancey calls 'grace' our truly last best word, 'It contains the essence of the gospel as a drop of water can contain the image of the sun.'

Jesus' birth was accompanied by a response. The Magi offered their gifts and bowed down to worship him. Angels were heard by the shepherds singing 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace to men on whom his favour rests.' and the shepherds, once they had seen Jesus rushed off to tell all their friends '...glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen..'

The Christmas story challenges us to make a response, as it did with all who made the journey to the manger.

Have you found the Christ child?

That might seem like a simple question to a group of churchgoers, but it is a fact that there are a large percentage of the population who would consider themselves 'religious' or 'spiritually minded' but who have an understanding of the divine that doesn't really allow for God breaking into the here and now of human existence as a baby. In a sense, their faith is not a million miles away from the Jews of Jesus' time who were living Old Testament lives in New Testament times - their Salvation dependent upon their own efforts and sacrificial offerings.

The Christian faith is centred upon the amazing Grace that manifested itself in the Christ child. As Clement of Rome (c95AD) said 'Through him we see as in a mirror the spotless and excellent face of God'

Have you searched for and found the Christ child?

“In many respects I find an unresurrected Jesus easier to accept. Easter makes him dangerous. Because of Easter I have to listen to his extravagant claims and can no longer pick and choose from his sayings. Moreover, Easter means he must be loose out there somewhere.”
(Philip Yancey)

“You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool; you can spit at him and kill him for a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”
(C.S. Lewis)

“Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God’s unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness and grace to other people...”

David Seamands

The great glad tidings tell!

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins:

1. What is the chief end [i.e. goal] of man?
A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

This reflects a common Christian perspective that all of Christian life is focused on God and our fellowship with him and other people. The collective response to this is expressed in our worship, which is primarily focussed on the Word and the Sacraments.

The earliest development of Christian worship is documented in the New Testament and writings of the early Church Fathers, including Justin Martyr. Worship seems to have been liturgical in form, and included the celebration of the Eucharist.

The Bible presents the very early Christians, still a part of the Jewish scene, frequenting both Temple and Synagogue as well as meeting together in private homes, frequently to ‘break bread’, a term which covers both the sharing of an agape meal, and celebrating the Eucharist.

The modern Protestant tradition tends to emphasize the proclamation of the Word. This includes readings from the Bible, and a sermon, which will hopefully help the congregation to understand the reading and apply it to their everyday lives.

Catholic worship also includes readings from Scripture and some exposition or homily. However the focus of worship in the Catholic church, as well as other ‘liturgical’ churches, is the sacrament of Communion, which is normally celebrated at every regular service.

However, there are many ways to worship, and the Church is discovering fresh expressions of worship which include both the old and the new - liturgy and extemporary prayer, new instruments and old, the use of creative arts, dance and performance, cafe church etc.

“The eternal God who made the entire universe; the One by whom everything that surrounds you is now being sustained - your seat, this book, your hands, your eyes, your thoughts, your very breath... This God chose to no longer live behind a curtain in a building where only the chief priest could come once a year. This awesome, all-creating, all-sustaining God became a little Jewish bloke. Instead of being surrounded by a curtain he was wrapped in a nappy; instead of being ministered to by priests (the Jewish elite), he was brought gifts by a bunch of foreigners (the wise men); instead of smelling incense he smelt animal dung; the awesome God who could not be seen was stared at by shepherds from the nightshift. *The Message* translation of John 1 tells us that God ‘moved into the neighborhood’ The word ‘Emmanuel’; it means God with us. It means God, not just standing alongside us, but God becoming like us *in every way* except that he was without sin”

Andy Croft and Mike Pilavachi, *Storylines - tracing threads that run through the Bible*

God inhabits the praises of his people, and despite rumors to the contrary does move with the times! We do not worship a historic God, we worship a contemporary God - who Scripture tells us is the same yesterday, today and forever!

And yes, our worship should overflow into our daily lives. This is how we glorify God, by showing his love, forgiveness and compassion in the world by our actions and our words.

We have seen on our study of this popular hymn the importance of a place, Bethlehem. We have looked at the character of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the symbolism of the gifts. Lastly we have looked briefly at the greatest gift of all, the Christ child and looked at what our response should be to this gift of grace to humankind. As we approach Christmas this year how will we celebrate the birth of Jesus?

Questions for discussion

- 1 The hymn says ‘O come to us, abide with us...’ What do you understand by this phrase?
- 2 Do you feel that as a church we effectively tell out the glad tidings of the Gospel message to our neighborhood? How could we do this better?
- 3 Think about how the church ‘does worship’ and discuss whether there are ways in which worship could be made more relevant to those who might come through the door.