

The songs of the season are all around us; in stores and restaurants; on the radio; and even here in the Church. During this Advent season, we are giving ourselves time to really listen to what these songs say about Jesus’ birth. Our hymns and Christmas carols are much more than simply words and music; they are ‘sung confessions,’ musical statements of faith; and as such, they preach a life-giving message. So, this week, our guest preacher is “Once in Royal David’s City.”

Stanza One: 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.

At first pass, this opening verse seems like it’s taking a “just the facts” approach to the nativity story. And it is certainly making a quick sketch of the Christmas event. But a closer look reveals a few important, loaded phrases. The first comes right away. “Once in royal David’s city” identifies the location where “a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed.” That city, of course, is Bethlehem, which historian Paul Maier estimates to have been populated by around 2,000 people at the time of Jesus’ birth. More important than the size though, was Bethlehem’s most famous son—up to this point anyway—and that is royal David; the shepherd boy who would become King. By reminding us that Jesus was born in David’s city, the hymnwriter is linking the two in a way that becomes more obvious as the hymn continues. But even here in verse one, the use of the title “Christ” (“Jesus Christ her little child,”) allows us to begin connecting the dots. “Christ,” you see, is not Jesus’ last name, but a title; a Greek way of talking about an anointed person, and typically, in Israel, if you were anointed, you were anointed to become a King. So while it would be unusual enough to put any baby in a manger, Mary has put her little child, Jesus the anointed one, the one who is King, in the place the animals feed, and that’s his first crib.

The second stanza says, “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 Savior holy”

This hymn wastes no time getting to the heart of Christmas. Not only are we to understand that a King has been born, but this little one is God and Lord of all, come down to earth from heaven. It is this very progression that Paul describes in Philippians chapter two, when he writes that Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” The imagery of God, the Lord of all, sheltering in a stable...his cradle in a stall...really should astonish us. As should the idea that a holy Savior lived on earth with the poor and mean and lowly. The word “mean” does not indicate ‘being cruel’ but is a dated way of talking about a person of low social class. The full surprise of this statement lies in the realization that our holy Savior did not just live with the people of low social standing in the sense that they were in the same place at the same time—his sheltering in a stable shows that he identifies with the poor, mean and lowly. He’s not come only to be with them but to be one of them. This has tremendous implications for those who trust

in Jesus and want to follow Him, and it's no coincidence that at Christmastime there is always a renewed interest in serving the poor, the mean, and lowly. The question is, what about the rest of the year?

Stanza Three: "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 feels for all our sadness/and he shares in all our gladness."

The hymn now takes us beyond the stable to consider another way in which Jesus identifies with humanity and that is in his childhood and ours. An additional mystery of the incarnation is the ordinary way in which Jesus grew up. As the stanza says, at one time, "he was little, weak, and helpless, tears and smiles like us he knew." He knows what it's like to run and play, and he knows how it feels to skin your knee or get picked on. He grew up, too. This means he relates to us fully.

This is maybe the most underrated aspect of Jesus' incarnation; He knows what it is like to be human. As it says in Hebrews 4, "...we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning." He feels for our sadness and shares in our gladness. The God we worship came down and got his hands dirty, lived in a family, and broke down at the graveside of a friend. Again, Hebrews 4: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace..." Christmas says God, in the person of His Son, is approachable. He knows and he cares.

The next stanza declares: "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."

What a verse. It takes us from a baby in a manger to the heights of heaven, just like that. How do we get there? It is the "redeeming love" of the child who is the Lord. This is very subtle, yet beautiful for its subtlety and gentleness. What I mean is this. To be redeemed is to be bought back. Something was lost and is purchased again. In this scenario, you and I are the redeemed. We had been in the grip of sin and shame, destined for death and eternal darkness, until we were bought. You were claimed; paid for, and the currency was not dollars and cents; the currency was the blood of Jesus. His innocent life for yours. Through his redeeming love you see him now, by faith, as your redeemer. And through his redeeming love you will "at last" see him in heaven, the fulfillment of the transaction he undertook at his cross. From a baby in a manger to the heights of heaven; the imagery continues in the fifth and final stanza.

"Not in that poor lowly stable/with the oxen standing by/ shall we see Him, but in heaven/set at God's right hand on high/then like stars, His children crowned/All in white, His praise will sound!"

The first line of this carol was foreshadowing: Once in *royal* David's city. Here is the payoff: we see the ultimate King, ruling in power from His position of royal authority. "Set at God's right hand on high" sounds a lot like "right hand man" and that's not far off; not only does it indicate closeness to God the Father, but the person seated at the right hand of the true King

functioned as the prime minister—the governor—the active agent of the crown—and Scripture tells us that is precisely the position the ascended Jesus occupies even now. In Ephesians One, Paul writes, “God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church.” (Eph. 1: 22 (NLT)) Jesus is ruling from the throne of His Father for our good and the good of the gospel. Beholding King Jesus is something we will do, by His grace. In a beautiful blend of Biblical imagery, the hymnwriter says, “then like stars, his children crowned/all in white, His praise will sound.”

The reference to “stars” echoes Paul’s letter to the Philippians. In chapter two he says of those who are children of God, “Then you will shine among [a crooked generation] like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.” (Phil. 2: 15-16 (NIV)) The phrase “all in white” recalls Revelation chapter 7, in which John looks and sees “a great multitude no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” (Rev. 7: 9—10 (NIV))

This gentle Christmas hymn does us a great favor; it takes us all the way to the *result* of Jesus’ incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. With great artistry, it displays the fullest possible meaning of Christmas, namely, that Jesus left heaven to join us on earth, so that one day we will leave earth and join him in heaven. And this song we sing here prepares us for the Great Song that continues there.