

Perspectives on Church Music 10

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The “Dark Side” of Christmas Carols

Several years ago, as the season of Advent was approaching, I received a telephone call from a writer for the Birmingham, Alabama, *Gazette*. The caller was asking for a comment for an article she was writing on the “dark side” of Christmas carols. Uncertain as to the angle for her story, she commented on the frequent reference in Christmas carols to Christ’s suffering and death.

Why, for example, should such a popular carol, “What Child Is This,” about a baby born in a manger, cradled in its mother’s arms, include a stanza about death, dying, and nails piercing bloody hands?

Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The Babe, the Son of Mary!

Or in the familiar carol, “The Holly and the Ivy,” which begins:

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

And its “bears the crown” because as each successive stanza points out, they are the marks of

Christ’s suffering and death:

The holly bears a blossom, *as white as the lily flower*,
The holly bears a berry, *as red as any blood*,
The holly bears a prickle, *as sharp as any thorn*,
The holly bears a bark, *as bitter as any gall*.

Why can’t we just enjoy the story of a baby born in a manger bringing peace on earth, without

mucking up the story with all this talk about suffering and death?

The simple answer is because the two are intimately connected. The Incarnation and Christ's suffering and death are of one piece, part of the same story! You can't have one without the other. The tradition of carols both remembers and reminds us of this simple fact: Christ came to die.

The first two gifts of the Magi mentioned in "We Three Kings of Orient Are" are gold, reflecting the child's kingship, and frankincense, symbolizing the presence of Diety. The third gift is described as follows:

Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom:
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in a stone cold tomb.

Bruce Blunt's (1899-1957) less familiar but exquisitely lovely carol/poem, "Bethlehem Down," describes the gift of the third king in these words:

When He is King they will clothe Him in grave sheets,
Myrrh for embalming, and wood for a crown,
He that lies now in the white arms of Mary,
Sleeping so lightly on Bethlehem Down.

The story of the Christ-Child born in the manger at Bethlehem is only the first part of the larger narrative of the story of salvation that ultimately leads to the cross. We forget that we can easily sentimentalize or otherwise distort the meaning of Christmas. The central meaning of Christmas is not about teaching children that it is better to give than to receive, or that Christmas is for children, or that it is a time for family. Nor is it simply a story of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild."

When tempted in that direction, remember Robert Southwell’s 16th-century carol that portrays something quite different.

This little Babe, so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan’s fold;
All hell doth at His presence quake,
Though He Himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak unarmed wise
The gates of hell He will surprise.

So sing those carols, “dark side” and all. Remember that it is that “dark side”—or should we say the “*right side*” of carols—that ultimately leads us to the true meaning of Christmas.

Happy caroling!

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[This essay is reprinted with permission from *More First Personal Singular: Reflections on Worship, Liturgy, and Children* (2015) by Carl Schalk and is available from MorningStar Music Publishers. MSM-90-51/ISBN 978-0-944529-64-5]