

A
CALENDAR
OF
CAROLS



GORDON GILES

Christmas reflections, prayers and praise

‘A treasure trove for every lover of Christmas carols – the delightful and sometimes unlikely stories of how our favourite carols came to be written, with insightful reflections on their deeper meaning.’

Sir John Rutter, composer and conductor

‘What a glorious book – brimming with familiar carols, as well as overlooked treasures from down the years. We meet wonderful and talented characters who’ve created words or music, learn about the times they lived in, and hear engaging tales of their passion for singing to match their devotion to God. Filled with facts and faith, Gordon has provided us with an inspiring but practical reference book that surely is a “joy to the world”!’

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Thomas Hewitt Jones, award-winning composer, music producer and songwriter



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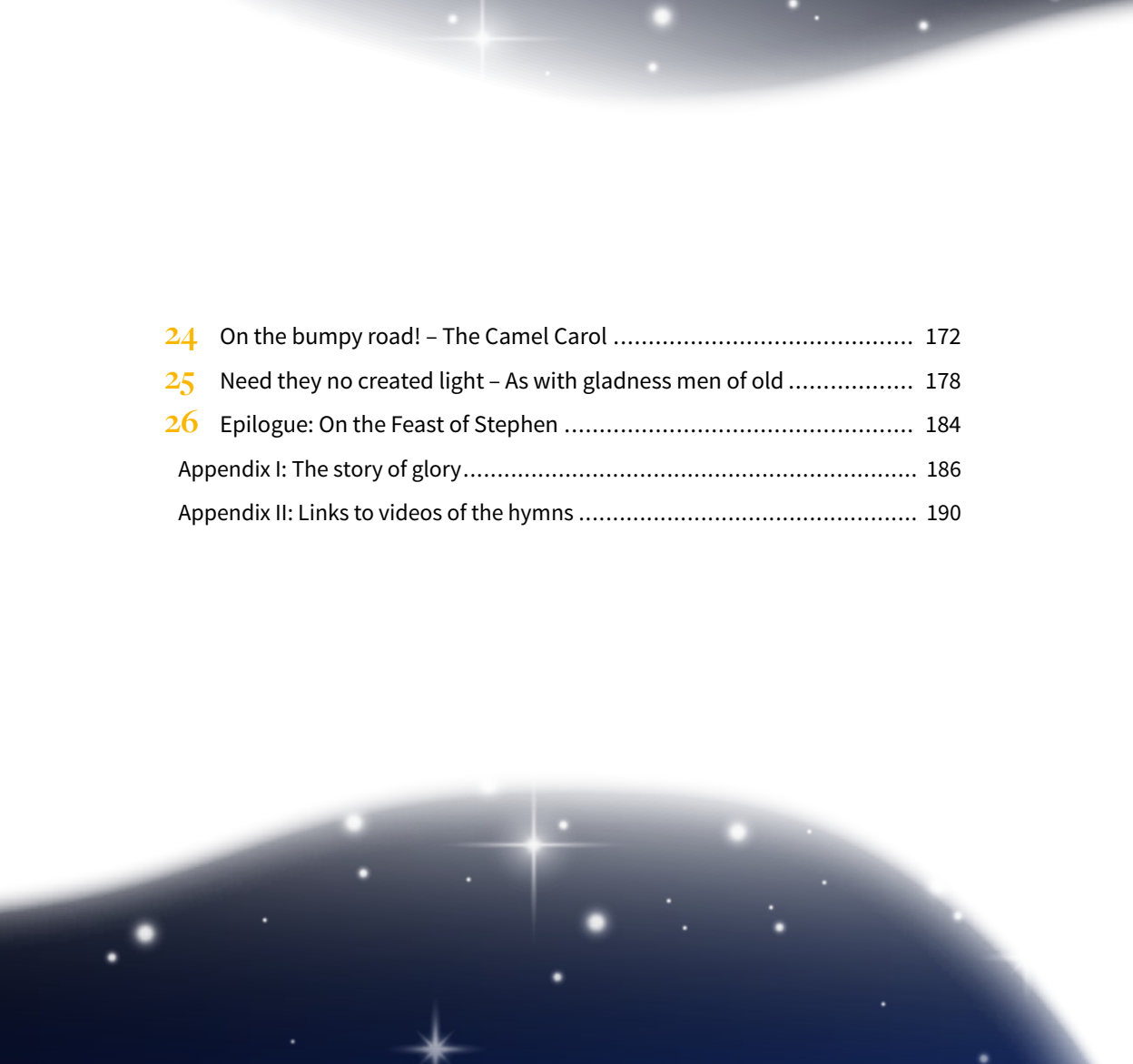


Ministries

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5 REPEAT THE SOUNDING JOY

Joy to the world!



Joy to the world, the Lord
is come!
Let earth receive her king!
Let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and
nature sing.

Joy to the earth, the Saviour reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills
and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his
 blessings flow
far as the curse is found,
far as the curse is found,
far as, far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth
 and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

Words: Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Music: 'Antioch', Lowell Mason (1792–1872)

This is an example of a hymn that has become a Christmas carol through its use during the season of Advent, and the reasons probably lie in the first line and the exuberant tune.

A paraphrase of the second part of Psalm 98, the hymn was written by Isaac Watts, who entitled it 'The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom' and published it in *The Psalms of David: Imitated in the language of the New Testament, and applied to the Christian state and worship* in 1719. Various versions have evolved with slightly differing words, used in different regions and lands. The third verse is often omitted, yet it reminds us of its psalmic origin and is reminiscent of Isaiah 55:13, in which we are reminded

that God offers blessing in response to suffering and sin. Watts described this blend of judgement and truth when he wrote: 'In [this hymn] which I formed out of the 98th Psalm I have fully expressed what I esteem to be the first and chief sense of the holy scriptures, both in this and the 96th Psalm, whose conclusions are both alike.'

The kingship referred to in the hymn can be thought of as God's or Christ's. It is more appropriate as an Advent hymn, rather than a Christmas carol, because it can more easily be associated with the second coming. It glorifies the *parousia* rather than celebrating the nativity. In this there are affinities with the great Advent hymn 'O come, O come, Emmanuel', which has also become thought of as a Christmas carol and played on the airwaves throughout December despite it being more about the return of Christ than the incarnation. By turning both hymns into Christmas carols, their origin and meaning has to some extent been diluted. Strictly speaking, 'Joy to the world!' is not a Christmas carol and should not be sung on Christmas Day.

It is good to reflect on the second coming as we head towards Christmas, and Advent hymns such as 'Joy to the world!' help us to do so. Since we tend to sing Christmas carols in the 'run-up to Christmas' now, it is serendipitous that Christmas carols that are, in fact, Advent hymns are sung during Advent, almost accidentally! 'Joy to the world!' also reminds us that Advent is not a miserable time to sing only dirges, but is

rather a season in which we joyfully and expectantly look forward to the end times, when all creation shall be redeemed as Christ returns in glory (see Romans 8:18–21).

This is brought home in the hymn's third verse, which refers to the 'curse' found in Genesis 3:17–18: 'Because you have... eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.' The fall brings a curse which is only ultimately released and redeemed in the birth (and death and resurrection) of Christ. Ironically, it is this verse, which alludes to the true meaning of Christmas, that is often omitted at carol services.

The text of the hymn resonates with a modern Christmas. The idea of preparing room is something we all try to do in this season. Advent is the time of preparation – preparing to meet judgement is a classical Advent theme – but add Christmas seasoning and we can think of preparing to welcome – to make room for – the babe of Bethlehem. Christmas can be so action-packed that it becomes too easy to marginalise or forget the true meaning and purpose of Christmas as we hang up decorations, do the Christmas shopping, stock up and generally anticipate the holiday. Heaven and nature sing for joy, and amid the stresses and (in the northern hemisphere) gloomy weather, and of course the celebrations, we too can sing and 'employ our songs' in harmony with all creation.

Some people believe that George Frideric Handel wrote the tune. This is extremely unlikely, despite the fact that Lowell Mason claimed it was ‘arranged from Handel’ in his *Occasional Psalm and Hymn Tunes* (published in 1837), in which the tune ‘Antioch’ appeared. Mason preferred anonymity: an earlier collection of his anonymously published tunes sold 50,000 copies. Working for a bank at the time, he did not want his musical interests to become too well-known, so he likely attributed his own work to more famous composers. Mason was an organist at two churches in Boston, while still working as a teller at the American Bank. In 1827 he became president of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society. He was also the first music teacher in an American state-run school, and in 1833 helped found the Boston Academy of Music.

Any reservations or confusion we might have about the seasonality of the text are outweighed by the jolly tune, the mood of which manifests a sheer joyfulness that could never be inappropriate when extolling the wonder of incarnation. We can ‘repeat the sounding joy’, and Mason’s tune literally makes us do that as we celebrate the wonders of both the first coming of truth and grace revealed in Jesus Christ and the eventual return of the Saviour. May that joy and wonder be ours every day this Advent as we journey towards Christmas.

*God our king, you rule the world with truth and grace
and by your Spirit bring joy to the world each day. Help
us prepare a room in our hearts this Christmas, and pour
down your blessings on all nations so that we may join
with all creation in singing of your wondrous love made
real in the incarnation of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*



12 ON CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE MORNING

I saw three ships



I saw three ships come sailing in
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day

I saw three ships come sailing in
On Christmas Day in the morning

And what was in those ships all three?
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day

And what was in those ships all three?
On Christmas Day in the morning

Our Saviour Christ and his lady
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day

Our Saviour Christ and his lady
On Christmas Day in the morning

Pray whither sailed those ships all three?
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day

Pray whither sailed those ships all three?
On Christmas Day in the morning

Oh, they sailed into Bethlehem
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day
Oh, they sailed into Bethlehem
On Christmas Day in the morning

And all the bells on earth shall ring
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day
And all the bells on earth shall ring
On Christmas Day in the morning

And all the angels in heaven shall sing
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day
And all the angels in heaven shall sing
On Christmas Day in the morning

And all the souls on earth shall sing
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day
And all the souls on earth shall sing
On Christmas Day in the morning

Then let us all rejoice, amain
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day
Then let us all rejoice, amain
On Christmas Day in the morning

Words: English, c. 17th century, collected by William Sandys (1792–1874)

Music: Melody from *Christmas Carols, New and Old* (1871)

This Christmas sea song first surfaced around 1666, the year of the great fire of London. In that year, Scotsman John Forbes included it in his *Cantus, Songs and Fancies to Three, Four or Five Parts*. William Sandys, who compiled *Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern* in 1833, knew it through a book called *Scotch Songs* and quoted with it a verse with a deeper theological meaning that seems to have since been thrown overboard:

*All sons of Adam, rise up with me,
Go praise the Blessed Trinitie, &c.
Then spake the Archangel Gabriel, said, Ave, Marie mild,
The Lord of Lords is with thee, now shall you go with child.
Ecce ancilla domini.*

*Then said the virgin, as thou hast said, so mat it be,
Welcome be heaven's king.
There comes a ship far sailing then,
Saint Michael was the stieres-man;
Saint John sate in the horn:
Our Lord harped, our Lady sang,
And all the bells of heaven they rang,
On Christ's sonday at morn, &c.*

Note the presence of the archangel Michael as skipper and St John in the crew! Sandys also linked it to a different carol, a Cornish one, the first verse of which is: 'As I sat on a sunny bank (*three times*), on Christmas Day in the morning.' (See *The Cornish Song Book*, 1929). The second verse of that carol is 'I spied three ships come sailing by', and the fourth: 'And he did whistle, and she did sing, on Christmas Day in the morning.'

Sandys gave the carol a second wind and kept it in the water. He also printed it in the first person singular, bolstering a rare Christmas trend – the carol from ‘my’ perspective (‘I saw three ships’). Not many carols are so personal, most others being descriptive and written in the third person or written in the first person plural (‘we’). ‘I sing of a maiden’ is another example, whereas in ‘Away in a manger’ the meditative ‘I’ only comes in halfway through (‘I love thee Lord Jesus’). Other ‘cradle songs’ tend to use ‘we’, the main exception being ‘Cradle Song’ by Isaac Watts (1674–1748).

The plot thickens when we consider the legend that underlies the maritime scenario. It is not about Mary and Bethlehem at all, but rather about the relics of the magi being transported to Cologne Cathedral. Behind the high altar is a sarcophagus containing the bones of three men of different ages. Opened and inspected in 1864, the shrine is the largest reliquary in the western world, built between 1180 and 1225. The story goes that Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine (c. 272–337), found their bodies and took them to Constantinople, and later Eustorgius took them to Milan. In 1162 the skulls were sent to Cologne by the Holy Roman Emperor Fredrick Barbarossa. According to the *New Oxford Book of Carols* (1992), a version of ‘I saw three ships’ sung by Humber River boatmen contains the lines: ‘I axed ‘em what they’d got on board... They said they’d got three crowns... I axed ‘em where they was taken to... They said they was ganging to Coln upon Rhine... I axed ‘em where they came frae.... They said they came frae Bethlehem.’

Once we get Germanic, we find a 14th-century carol called ‘Es kompt ein Schiff geladen’, the first verse of which may be translated as:

*There comes a ship that's laden
and rich her precious hoard:
God's son most gracious
and his eternal word.*

It goes on to speak of a valuable cargo, of love as sails and the Holy Spirit as the mast. The ship drops anchor, and thus the Word made flesh comes into land. Jesus is born in a Bethlehem stable, and whoever would gladly kiss and adore him must endure his pains and anguish, must die with him, and rise to win that eternal life, which he alone brings about.

The idea that the Word made flesh arrives by boat is fanciful and delightful, but it also hints of an undercurrent of theological meaning. Mystically, we might think of Mary as the vessel in which salvation is borne to the world. Roman Catholic devotion still thinks of her in this way; Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801–90) described her as the ‘vessel of honour’. We might also remember that many churches have a ‘nave’, a word which means ‘ship’, so in a sense we are all in the boat that navigates the seas of earthly life before we cross over to the shores of heaven.

Meanwhile, if we think less about the journey and the ships, and more about the mention of three of them, could it be that Father, Son and Holy Spirit come 'sailing in' on Christmas morning as the Trinity comes into full glory with the incarnation of God made human in Jesus Christ? Ships, sailors, donkeys, camels and magi aside, this carol helps us remember this if only by its threefold mention of the trinity of ships. Meanwhile, seafaring metaphors for faith abound, and however we find or interpret them, the idea of having Jesus on board through the storms of life is a comforting and inspiring one (see Luke 8:22–25). For we are all on board those three ships of faith, hope and love.



*God who is three in one and one in three, until the day
when we reach the shore, guide us and guard us as we
sail in hope, assured of the promises revealed in the birth,
death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*



Christmas is a musical destination as well as a spiritual one, yet when we reach the newborn Christ child in the manger, what do we see? What music do we hear in our hearts as we join our songs with those of the angels?

In 25 short chapters, each concluding with a specially written prayer, Gordon Giles explores the spiritual and biblical allusions to be found within our best-loved Christmas carols.

A Calendar of Carols can be used either as an Advent calendar up to Christmas, or more flexibly over the Christmas season and into January.



Gordon Giles is Canon Chancellor of Rochester Cathedral. He is the author of several books for BRF Ministries and editor of *New Daylight* Bible reading notes. He is an editor of both *Hymns Ancient and Modern* and *The Revised English Hymnal*.

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