

O Little Town of Bethlehem

In 1865, Rev. Phillips Brooks (Episcopalian) went to Bethlehem, and three years later wrote a Sunday School Christmas song, for which a friend (Lewis Redner) wrote its tune. Brook's biographer, Rev. Louis Benson, reckoned that the tune sold the lyric. For construction, each stanza has the same weight. Each stanza has 8 lines. Looking at stanza three, typical of all, we can see that Line 1 & 5 lack rhyme, that L2 & L4 rhyme (given/heaven), that L3 rhymes in itself (imparts/hearts), that L6 & L8 rhyme (sin/in), and that L7 rhymes in itself (will/still). That's a double ABCB¹ sequence in each stanza. Yet for content, the stanzas have different weight. One stanza (which, incidentally, urged children to pray to baby Jesus) was challenged. Brooks changed a line from [the Undeiled] to [the Mother mild], to avoid sounding Romanish, then wisely dropped the whole stanza.¹ A far better stanza, *How Silently*, possibly had a young friend, the deaf & blind Helen Keller who had 'always' felt God, in mind. A 1903 song book transposed the 2 halves of stanza 2, an error long righted. Benson was uncertain about whether the carol should be called a hymn, because until the last stanza the singer sings to Bethlehem—but carol or hymn, tweaking could make me happy.

Firstly, I'm not happy to sing to a town, especially to a ghost town of history. Obviously some are. Ernst Anschutz wouldn't talk to daisies, yet he affectionately sung to Christmas trees destined for the fire (Is.44:14-7)—much pleasure they didst give him.² Call Anschutz a nutter, if you like, but Christmas trees, Christmas towns, is there really much difference between singing to Bethlehem and singing to its trees? Ask no favours of your firs. Secondly, Phillips Brooks' song has picked up archaism—the new becomes old—but from the word Go has had an annualism, whereby the past is imaginatively presented as the present: it's what I call a tardisial song.³ I would rather sing the lyrics historically, as if looking back on an event, than look at it unfold. Thirdly, its line, peace to men on earth, besides showing sageism, is based on a scribal error with Lk.2:14.⁴ Fourthly, I jib at asking Jesus himself for anything. True, there are rare critical circumstances

¹ Composed & dropped by Brooks: [Where children pure and happy / Pray to the blessed Child / Where misery cries out to Thee / Son of the [Undeiled]/Mother mild] / Where Charity stands watching / And Faith holds wide the door / The dark night wakes, the glory breaks / And Christmas comes once more.

² I think of a Germany C16 song about a fir tree that picked up contrasts to human relationships not staying ever true/green, and eventually became the dubious custom stateside.

³ A Tardis is sometimes a blue box, bigger inside than out, an acrostic for *Time And Relative Dimensions In Space*, and a fun way to visit the Manger.

⁴ Luke wrote *eudokias*, the genitive form, meaning not that it was God giving peace & goodwill, but giving peace/shalom to those of goodwill towards him, the faithful such as Simeon (Lk.2:29f.). My college's notes Bible Text & Translation 2 (CE03) cover this text more.

permitted, such as *maranatha*.⁵ But to actually ask him *as if he is a holy infant*, is probably something that even the Blessed Virgin would not have done. Jesus is no baby, though he has been one. If we ask Jesus, it should at least be to one who has been a baby, not as one who still is. Is it the cute & cuddly fantasy we seek, or the nail printed lord? It gets worse, since the request, if by Christians, is asking him to convert the converted. Ask him no folly. Have we not even the sense of Nicodemus, who gaily joked about his mother rebirthing him (Jhn.3:4)?⁶ On a positive note, as Benson noted, is the line about hopes and fears converging, which is a powerful take on salvation history: at last, God has come when we feared he'd given up on us, though to some it's "the dreadful smell of death and doom" (NLT: 2 Cor.2:16)! Those who loved God hoped he would visit, and feared he would not. Those who hated God hoped he would not visit, and feared he would.

From: 1. O little town of Bethlehem / How still we see thee lie! / Above thy deep and dreamless sleep / The silent stars go by. / Yet in thy dark streets shineth / The everlasting Light; / The hopes and fears of all the years / Are met in thee to-night.

2. For Christ is born of Mary / And gathered all above / While mortals sleep, the angels keep / Their watch of wondering love. / O morning stars, together / Proclaim the holy birth; / And praises sing to God the King / And peace to men on earth.

3. How silently, how silently / The wondrous gift is given; / So God imparts to human hearts / The blessings of His Heaven. / No ear may hear His coming / But in this world of sin / Where meek souls will receive Him still / The dear Christ enters in.

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

To: Oh little town of Bethlehem / how silently it lay / Above its deep and dreamless sleep / the special star did stay / And in its dark streets God did shine / the everlasting light / the hopes and fears of all the years / were met in it that night.

For Christ was born of Mary / And gathered all above / While mortals slept, the angels kept / Their watch of wondering love / the heavenly choir together / Proclaimed the holy birth / And they did sing to God the king / and of his peace to earth.

How silently, how silently / the wondrous gift was given / So God imparts to human hearts / the blessings of his heaven / No ear can hear his coming / But in this world of sin / Where needy will receive him still / the dear christ enters in.

The holy one of Bethlehem / is with us to this day / He's cast out sin and entered in / was born in us his way / We can hear the Christmas angels / who glad tidings did tell / He's come to us, to live with us / our lord Emmanuel!

⁵ If from *marana tha* (invocation), rather than *maran atha* (declaration). In any case, see Rv.22:20.

⁶ See <http://mdtc.eu/wgg0303.html>