



December 12, 2006 anno Domini

The Four Hymns of Christmas

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. Luke 2:8-14

Christmastide, my favorite Season, is approaching swiftly with all its attendant warmth and joy. Christians around the world join in heart and spirit to observe this most blessed memorial of the Birth of Christ our Saviour. During this season, our love is most abundantly expressed to all around us. The eyes of little children are the brightest, and the devotions of the elderly are full of memories of Christmases Past and the prospects of a glorious Christmas Future.

Our Christian souls are disposed to express our Joy in the singing of beautiful Carols and Hymns of the Season. The Book of Common Prayer, a rich reservoir of spiritual power and light, provides four special Songs of Christmas for our worship and edification.

The first Song of Christmas is the Magnificat of Mary, pg 26 of the Prayer Book, that begins with the words of Gospel of St. Luke 1:46:

46 And Mary said, My soul doth magnify1 the Lord, 47 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. 48 For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. 49 For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. 50 And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. 51 He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52 He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. 53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. 54 He hath holpen 1 his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; 55 As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

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One can sense the great joy and devotion of Mary in this instant of Thanksgiving Prayer. As I was driving to my office a few days ago in the pre-dawn darkness, the air was cold and pristine. The stars sparkled from a cloudless sky. I began thinking about the innocent young Mary who was visited by the Archangel Gabriel so many years ago in a village called Nazareth. I thought about her being at home doing her daily chores - all alone. She must have been shocked at the warm Light that illumined her in her solace, but she was not overly fearful. I believe the approach of God always gives us a great peace. As I was contemplating this scene, I wondered, "What would have happened had her parents been present?" I'm sure the Angel would have deliberately chosen a time that would be a quiet, solitary moment when He could approach Mary alone. I believe that is precisely characteristic of God and His Holy Spirit. I believe He most often speaks to us when there are no others to distract our attention. His voice is soft and still toward those of His own choosing. Had her parents been present, it is unlikely that Mary would have seen or heard the voice and presence of the great Archangel Gabriel sent from the Father. As I thought on these things, my heart melted with love for her, and her Child, and the Father who demonstrated such great Love to us, and to her.

The second Song of Christmas, found on pg 14 of the Prayer Book, is the 'Benedictus (Blessed).' This song begins with the prayer of Zacharias beginning at the 68th verse of the Gospel of St Luke, chap 1:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people"

This beautiful Song of praise emerges from the soul of a man struck dumb by the Lord until the circumcision of his son, John – forerunner of Christ. Quite often, our most beautiful thoughts and visions are manifested after a period of solitude and quiet reflection.

The third Song of Christmas is the Song of Simeon, or Nunc Dimittis, found on page 28 of the Prayer Book. It is a masterful expression of great release from years of anticipation. The good man, Simeon, recognizes the baby Jesus as the long awaited Messiah and Saviour when his parents bring Him to the Temple for circumcision. This brief and lovely prayer is recorded in the second chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke:

29 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: 30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, 31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; 32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

The fourth and final Prayer Book Song of Christmas may be read on page 25 and is known as the Gloria in Excelsis Deo. This majestic Song is the Song of the Angels in which they proclaim the good tidings to all and, especially, to the poor shepherds "*keeping watch over their flocks at night*."

This reading is discovered at the Gospel of St. Luke 2:14:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Shall we join with Zacharias, Mary, Simeon, and the Angels this Christmastide and sing praises to the marvelous works of the Lord and His soon appearing?

May this loving and beautiful season be more than a 'Winter Break' or 'Happy Holidays' to those who know the Lord. May it be a Merry, Merry Christmas as your Lord would have it.

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