

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

There were five Sundays in November and “Churches together in Blandford” held a streamed ecumenical service on the fifth Sunday of that month. It was introduced by Andy Hall (URC Minister); the Parish Church provided the music; Pauline brought the ‘Word’ and the whole service was hosted by the Evangelical Church (Pastors: Emma and Dale Carmichael).

It was clear that BEC have been streaming their services on a Sunday and out of interest I went to their website to see what they have been offering. Starting on the second Sunday of Advent they have a series based, each week, on a well-known Christmas Carol for the theme of the service and the ‘message’. They started the series with “Joy to the World” (a carol I originally associated with American churches – it wasn’t in MHB, the hymn book of my youth. Imagine my surprise, when it appeared in Hymns & Psalms, words by Isaac Watts and a tune based on Handel!). Featured this week was “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”, an all-time favourite by Charles Wesley. That started me thinking – how much do we really know about this much loved, much sung carol? Did you know that, typical of Charles, he penned **ten four line stanzas** with the title, “Hymn for Christmas Day”.

It appeared in the joint publication by the Wesley brothers of “Hymns and Sacred Poems” (1739).

The carol has been much adapted, principally by George Whitefield in 1758 when he produced “A collection of hymns for social worship, more particularly designed for the use of the Tabernacle and Chapel congregations”.

“Hymn for Christmas-Day” (Charles Wesley, 1739)	Adaption by George Whitefield (1758)	STF
HARK how all the Welkin rings "Glory to the King of Kings, "Peace on Earth, and Mercy mild, "GOD and Sinners reconcil'd!	HARK! the Herald Angels sing Glory to the new-born King! Peace on Earth, and Mercy mild, God and Sinners reconcil'd.	Hark! The herald-angels sing glory to the new-born King, peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful all ye Nations rise, Join the Triumph of the Skies, Universal Nature say "CHRIST the LORD is born to Day!	Joyful all ye Nations rise, Join the Triumphs of the Skies; Nature rise and worship him, Who is born at Bethlehem.	Joyful, all ye nations, rise, join the triumph of the skies; with the angelic host proclaim: 'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'
CHRIST, by highest Heav'n ador'd, CHRIST, the Everlasting Lord, Late in Time behold him come, Offspring of a Virgin's Womb.	Christ by highest Heav'n ador'd, Christ the everlasting Lord; Late in Time behold-him come, Offspring of the Virgin's Womb.	<i>Hark! The herald-angels sing glory to the new-born King.</i>
Veil'd in Flesh, the Godhead see, Hail th' Incarnate Deity! Pleas'd as Man with Men t' appear JESUS, our <i>Immanuel</i> here!	Veil'd in Flesh the Godhead see, Hail th' incarnate Deity! Pleas'd as Man with Men t'appear, Jesus our Emmanuel here.	Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord, late in time behold him come, off-spring of a virgin's womb. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see! Hail, the incarnate Deity!
Hail the Heav'nly Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! ** Light and Life to All he brings, Ris'n with Healing in his Wings.	Hail the Heav'n-born Prince of Peace Hail the Son of Righteousness! ** Light and Life around he brings, Ris'n with Healing in his Wings.	Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel: <i>Hark! The herald-angels sing glory to the new-born King.</i>
Mild he lays his Glory by, Born—that Man no more may die, Born—to raise the Sons of Earth, Born—to give them Second Birth.	Mild he lays his Glory by, Born that Men no more may die; Born to raise the sons of Earth, Born to give them second Birth.	Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail, the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.
Come, Desire of Nations, come, Fix in Us thy humble Home, Rise, the Woman's Conqu'ring Seed, Bruise in Us the Serpent's Head.	Come, Desire of Nations, come, Fix in us thy heav'nly Home; Rise the Woman's conqu'ring Seed, Bruise in us the Serpent's Head.	Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth:
Now display thy saving Pow'r, Ruin'd Nature now restore, Now in Mystic Union join Thine to Ours, and Ours to Thine.		<i>Hark! The herald-angels sing glory to the new-born King.</i>
Adam's Likeness, LORD, efface, Stamp thy Image in its Place, Second Adam from above, Reinstate us in thy Love.	Adam's Likeness now efface, Stamp thy Image in its Place; Second Adam from above, Work it in us by thy Love.	
Let us Thee, tho' lost, regain, Thee, the Life, the Inner Man: O! to All Thyself impart, Form'd in each Believing Heart.		

** Malachi 4:2 (NRSV)

*But for you who revere my name the **sun of righteousness** shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.*

In many versions of the carol “**Sun** of Righteousness” is changed to “**Son** of Righteousness” – the alternative may appear to be more applicable in the context of the verse but Wesley, as we have seen, was “quoting” from the prophet Micah.

What tune should be used for the carol?

Charles Wesley requested “Slow and Solemn Music”. He had in mind the same music as was used for his great Easter hymn – “*Christ the Lord is risen today*”.

The tune with which we are all familiar **can** be sung slowly (Anglican Cathedrals?) but is certainly not what Charles Wesley had in mind. He died in 1788, so never heard what we know!

In 1840 Felix Mendelssohn composed a ‘secular cantata’ to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the invention of printing using moving type by Johannes Gutenberg. This “*Festgesang*” was known as the “Gutenberg Cantata”. (You will remember that the earliest printed Bible from this time is known as the “Gutenberg Bible”.)

In 1855, William H. Cummings adapted Mendelssohn’s music from the second section of the cantata - (*Vaterland, in deinen Gauen*) – to fit the words of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” and it has become the standard choice ever since.

One or two other composers have made attempts to produce a new tune for the carol but they have never become popular.

It was only this last weekend while sharing in the streamed ‘Christingle’ service from MCH Westminster that I learned one of those who had tried was Queen Victoria’s husband and Consort, Prince Albert!

Wikipedia – reference; the Musical Times 1944 – tells us:

An uncommon arrangement of the hymn to the tune “*See, the Conqu’ring hero comes*” from Handel’s *Judas Maccabaeus*, normally associated with the hymn “*Thine Be the Glory*”, is traditionally^[16] used as the recessional hymn of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols at St Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin. This is broadcast live each year on Christmas Eve on RTÉ Radio 1

The usual (first) three verses are divided into six verses, each with chorus. The arrangement features a brass fanfare with drums in addition to the cathedral organ, and takes about seven and a half minutes to sing.