

‘The Nation’s Favourite Carol’ – Really?

I am writing this mid-afternoon on the Sunday before Christmas, having just watched ‘Songs of Praise’ on BBC 1.

The programme was a countdown and performance of the top ten carols – as voted for by the viewers.

I am often sceptical about such events!! – is it a ‘free choice’ or do you have to vote for something off a list provided by the producers of the programme?

One by one, well-known carols ‘fell’ by the wayside until finally the number one choice was revealed – and that was a real surprise! The carol receiving most votes from ‘Songs of Praise’ viewers was “O Holy Night” by Adolphe Adam. The version, by that name, which we know is a ‘translation’ by John Sullivan Dwight.

Adolphe Adam had set to music the words of a poem by Placide Cappeau - “Minuit, chrétiens” (Midnight, Christians). The carol is known, in France, as the ‘Cantique de Noël’.

Returning to the BBC broadcast; this ‘winning’ carol was sung as a solo by Andrea Bocelli. He is not one of my favourite tenors but ears pricked up and eyes opened wide when he sang the original French version of the carol - with English sub-titles. Seen on screen was a ‘literal’ translation, not the familiar Dwight version.

Not being fluent in the French language (one of my teachers wrote in a report that I had been a great help in recording a weekly radio programme, but, “French was abysmal”!!) I had to concentrate on the words on screen.

That was the trigger for some ‘research’ - the words of that literal translation intrigued me.

The three verses of original text and a literal translation by Todd Victor Leone are reproduced below:

Minuit, chrétiens, c’est l’heure solennelle
Où l’Homme-Dieu descendit jusqu’à nous,
Pour effacer la tache originelle,
Et de son Père arrêter le courroux.
Le monde entier tressaille d’espérance,
À cette nuit qui lui donne un Sauveur.
Peuple, à genoux, attends ta délivrance
Noël! Noël! Voici le Rédempteur!
Noël! Noël! Voici le Rédempteur!

Midnight, Christians, it is the solemn hour
When God as man descended among us
To expunge the stain of original sin
And to put an end to the wrath of his father.
The entire world thrills with hope
On this night which gives us a saviour.
People, on your knees, attend your deliverance.
Christmas! Christmas! Here is the Redeemer!
Christmas! Christmas! Here is the Redeemer!

De notre foi que la lumière ardente
Nous guide tous au berceau de l’Enfant,
Comme autrefois une étoile brillante
Y conduisit les chefs de l’Orient.
Le Roi des rois naît dans une humble crèche;
Puissants du jour, fiers de votre grandeur,
À votre orgueil, c’est de là que Dieu prêche.
Courbez vos fronts devant le Rédempteur!
Courbez vos fronts devant le Rédempteur!

The ardent light of our Faith,
Guides us all to the cradle of the infant,
As in ancient times a brilliant star
Conducted the Magi there from the orient.
The King of kings was born in a humble manger;
O mighty ones of today, proud of your grandeur,
It is to your pride that God preaches.
Bow your heads before the Redeemer!
Bow your heads before the Redeemer!

Le Rédempteur a brisé toute entrave,
La Terre est libre et le Ciel est ouvert.
Il voit un frère où n’était qu’un esclave,
L’amour unit ceux qu’enchaînait le fer.
Qui lui dira notre reconnaissance?
C’est pour nous tous qu’il naît, qu’il souffre et meurt.
Peuple, debout! Chante ta délivrance.
Noël! Noël! Chantons le Rédempteur!
Noël! Noël! Chantons le Rédempteur!

The Redeemer has broken all shackles.
The earth is free and heaven is open.
He sees a brother where there was once but a slave;
Love unites those who restrain the sword.
Who will tell him our gratitude?
It is for us all that he was born, that he suffered and died.
People, stand up, sing your deliverance!
Christmas! Christmas! Let us sing the Redeemer!
Christmas! Christmas! Let us sing the Redeemer!

I wonder how many people would have voted for this had they realised the nature of the original text?

All of the references - ‘original sin’; ‘the Father’s wrath’; ‘the pride of the mighty’; ‘seeing a slave as a brother’ are central to the Christmas story, but not comfortable concepts.

I certainly had never seen a translation like this before – in comparison, the Dwight version, which I have known since my youth, is not a true “translation” and offers words that are, perhaps, “acceptable” to the public at large.

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