

CAROLS WITH
THE MONKS



COMMENTARY
2021

Welcome Yule

Welcome, one and all! On this Christmas Eve, the Benedictine monastic tradition of hospitality calls us to embrace difference in a loving spirit of reverence. Although we may at present experience this difference as discord in our sorely troubled world, we are invited to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us, for the glory of God (cf. Romans 15:7).

It is fitting then, that our first carol is titled *Welcome Yule*. Yule is Anglo-Saxon for Christmas. The text of the carol is from a 15th century manuscript and was set to music in 1939 by Healey Willan. The carol teaches us what it means to welcome Christmas. First of all, to welcome Christmas is to welcome Christ, to worship him on this holy day. But to welcome Christmas means also welcoming the saints and martyrs who bore witness to Christ, welcoming our Blessed Mother, “the queen of bliss”, welcoming in the New Year and especially welcoming you that are here. In a word, to welcome all because, in giving us His Son, God gave Christmas to us all.

Bóg się rodzi

What is a carol? A catchy tune? A nostalgic melody? For the people of Poland, the carol *Bóg się rodzi* (“God is born”) encompasses so much more. It is mystagogy; it leads us into the mystery of Our Lord’s birth. Before mystery, words fail. We can only put side-by-side the surpassing glory of God on the one hand and the distressing poverty of his appearance among us on the other. Part of the first verse can be translated:

God is born; Power trembles,
Lord of Heaven, stripped, laid bare...
Scorned and humbled – Glorious One,
Mortal now – the King of Ages!

Yet is it not the very joining of God’s greatness and his loving self-abasement as a little Child which draws us every year anew with fascination to the crèche? All the more so in troubled times of history. When the carol’s author, Franciszek Karpiński, composed it in 1792, his Polish countrymen felt betrayed and adrift on the sea of history because their country was being carved up by neighbouring nations. So this carol, along with many others, allowed the Polish people to raise their hearts in confident hope that God would endow them with his own strength and take care of all their hamlets and cities. It was even being considered as a possible national anthem. As we enter the mystery of God’s birth among us, let us do so with the same confidence that earthly powers tremble before this Child. He has left behind the joy of heaven and entered among his beloved, shared their burdens and their sorrows. Our land, all we possess, is in his hands.

Once in Royal David's City

Although an old classic, dating from 19th century England, our next carol, *Once In Royal David's City*, has a message powerful enough to blow the stockings off your mantel piece.

To begin with, the stage is set in the city of David (which is to say, Bethlehem) where there lies a lowly cattle shed in which a mother lays her baby in a manger for a bed. This familiar scene is somewhat stereotypical for us as it is presented to our imagination year after year. But in the second verse this image is put into perspective as we recall that “[Christ] came down to earth from heaven, Who is God and Lord of all.” Let us ask ourselves: what does it mean to us that God, Who is all-powerful, and all-loving, came into this world as a poor and lowly child?

When each of us monks makes his solemn profession we are reminded that Christ “became poor to make us a rich, a slave to set us free. With love no words can tell, he redeemed the world...” This, my friends, is why we celebrate Christ's birth. He came into the world because of His love for you and me. This little Babe is Himself the God of Love together with the Father in the Unity of the Holy Spirit. In the last verse of our carol we sing of the very fulfillment of God's coming as man and His Divine Plan: “And he leads his children on to the place where he is gone.” This is the destiny for which we were made. God Himself is the fulfillment of all our desires.

The Little Drummer Boy

The *Little Drummer Boy* has been a very popular Christmas carol since the 1950s. Originally titled *Carol of the Drum*, this song was written by the musician and school-teacher Katherine Kennicott Davis in 1941. It seems to have been inspired by the French Carol *Pat-a-pan*, though she gave it the interesting subtitle *A Czech carol, freely transcribed*.

The carol tells of a boy, a boy who very much loves his drum. He is called to come and see the newborn king, and to bring his finest gifts to lay before Him. Perhaps you remember what it's like to be a child, to receive a Christmas present, to open it, and to discover a special toy - perhaps a drum - just for you. Your child-like happiness knows no bounds as your high voice shouts for joy. Then you get to the serious business of playing your drum – all day. “Every good gift comes from above,” the Apostle St. James tells us. So what can we give back to God, for all that He has done for us? What would you give to Jesus, the newborn King, if you saw Him lying in a manger, for you? For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him would not perish, but would have eternal life. It is He who loves us, and is giving everything to us. For this reason we must rejoice in His love - and in our poverty, but with the gifts that He has given us, make music fit for His royalty and divinity. As the pilgrims march forth to the beat of the boy's drum and arrive at the royal stable, the boy admits his poverty and humbly asks if he may play. The mother of Jesus nods her approval, even the animals love the beat, and finally, the Lord Jesus smiles at him.

Do You Hear What I Hear

When the unspeakable threat of nuclear war loomed large at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, Noel Regney and his wife Gloria Shayne were commissioned to write a Christmas song. Understandably, they were in no mood to do so. However, when Noel was walking the streets of New York, he saw two babies smiling at one another as they were being pushed along in strollers by their mothers. Inspiration struck and the well-known Christmas carol *Do You Hear What I Hear* was born.

In the carol, the astounding news of a Child's birth, a Child who will bring goodness and light, is related with increasing depth and fervour; first from the night wind to a little lamb, then from the little lamb to a shepherd boy, and finally from the shepherd boy to the king who implores all people to pray for peace. This glorious crescendo from the small and lowly to the great and mighty is a beautiful illustration of the synodality which Pope Francis asks of the Church today. This Christmas, let us make an effort to hear the cries of creation, the cries of the poor and marginalized, the cries of those who think differently than us, and the cries of those nearest to us so that we may see in them the Child Jesus longing for our love. Do you know what I know? A Child, our God, shivers in the cold. Let us bring Him silver and gold!

Guillô, Prends Ton Tambourin (Pat-a-pan)

P*at-a-pan* (or *Guillo prends ton tambourin*) hearkens back to the Little Drummer Boy by focusing on specific instrumentation to gladden the heart of the Child Jesus. The carol was written and published around 1700 by Bernard de le Monnoye, a prolific Burgundian carol composer. The lyrics revolve around simple shepherds who regale the baby Jesus with the sweet melodious strains of a drum and a flute.

Although predominantly a children's carol, *Pat-a-pan* is an evocative testament to the necessity for each one of us to attain a child-like disposition in all that we do. The word "Pat-a-pan" is considered an onomatopoeia for the sound of the drum, while "tu-re-lu-re-lu" is representative of the sound of the flute. The drum, or tambourin, was a drum strapped over one shoulder and played with a single mallet, while the flute was a three holed instrument that can be played with one hand. This is actually significant, since one person could play both instruments at the same time quite easily. Bringing in two instrumentalists symbolizes the unity of the church and the people of God. Each of us contributes in our own unique way to make music in tandem with our neighbors, friends and enemies alike. The light playfulness depicted in the carol helps to vanquish all unnecessary 'adult-like' dispositions so that the Divine can penetrate more perfectly into our everyday existence. It allows us to come together as a catholic, universal, community to dispel the evil one's presence from our midst.