

O Come, All Ye Faithful  
4th Sunday of Advent - Year C - 12/23/2018  
Psalm Reading: 80:1-7  
1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Micah 5:2-5a, 2<sup>nd</sup>: Luke 2:8-20

One of the most favored Christmas hymns of all time is  
*Adeste Fideles*:

(David Usher Sings Acapella)

*Adeste, fideles, laeti triumphantes Venite, venite in Bethlehem.  
Natum videte Regem angelorum. Venite adoremus, Venite  
adoremus, Venite adoremus, Dominum.*

Thank you David...Many of you are probably familiar with those words as sung by Bing Crosby. His version was released in 1942 during the tough, early years of the Second World War when Bing was at the height of his powers and the height of his popularity. Many years before Bing Crosby recorded it, the song *Adeste Fideles* was written in fits and starts by an Englishman named John Francis Wade over a three year period, from 1740 to 1743. He was living in France at the time, and worked at a university as a copyist.<sup>1</sup> He was a Catholic living in exile in France because he had backed the wrong person to be king of England. Wade actually wrote eight verses to the hymn. But generally only three or four verses are sung in most performances.

I am sure you recognize the tune as what we would think of as "Come, All Ye Faithful". This familiar hymn is number 41 in your pew hymnal. I would encourage you to get out that pew

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-come-all-ye-faithful> (accessed December 20, 2018)

hymnal and flip over to that page so that we can sing the first verse of it together right now. Please remain seated as we sing:

*O come, all ye faithful, Joyful and triumphant,  
O Come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem!  
Come and behold Him, Born the King of angels!  
O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!*

This is a pretty good translation into English of *Adeste Fideles*, and it was done by a gentleman named Frederick Oakeley in 1841. (It amazes me how many of our Christmas hymns were written or arranged in the 17 and 18 hundreds. I did a statistical analysis of our hymnal and found that of the 39 Christmas hymns that 24 are from before 1900. That is more than half! That says something about our love of tradition.) Anyway, Oakeley translated three verses from the Latin and these are what we find in our hymnal today.

The first line and the title of this hymn, “O come, all ye faithful”, is a call to all Christians to come together in one spot. There are so many of us Christians, and we separate ourselves by denomination, but we have one great thing in common and that is our Lord, Jesus Christ. This song is a call for all of us who are faithful to Christ, to gather together. And the spot where we are to gather is revealed to us in the next line, “O come ye to Bethlehem.”

This line comes out of our reading from the Gospel of Luke chapter 2, verse 15. “...the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see the thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So, it is not the town itself that we are going to see. It is, rather, a symbolic place that we look

toward. Remember that Bethlehem was just a little town. Sure, on the night in question, it was bustling and overflowing with people as they gathered for the census Caesar had ordered early in that first century. But Bethlehem had always been a humble place, a place of lowly beginnings that expanded to something great. Bethlehem was the city where King David was born, and it was the place where our “humble Christ was born.” But as the shepherds said, it was a place worth going to see. It was there the great thing had happened or rather has happened.

So the thing that has happened is the birth of the Christ child. “Born the King of angels”. In fact, the Lord of all creation. And so, we Christians, in all our little self-imposed groupings, end up looking in the same direction, at the same place, at the same person, the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

And what are the shepherds to do? Well, they are not just there to see Christ, but as we can hear in the refrain, “O come, let us adore him!” The shepherds intend to adore him. And we do not hear this line once in the song, but three times. Is this a nod to the Trinity or is it just an outburst of enthusiasm? You know there is a time for thinking, and I do a lot of that. But there is also a time for experiencing, and a time for expression. This is what is called for here – just glorying in “Him, Christ, the Lord.” This is what Christmas time is really all about, setting aside our racing overthinking minds, setting aside our skepticism, setting aside our differences with one another and simply reveling in the moment, knowing, worshiping, adoring.

Please sing with me the second verse of *O Come, All Ye Faithful...*

*Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, Born this happy morning,  
Jesus, to Thee be all glory given;  
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!  
O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!*

And so to Jesus we give all glory. You know this hymn is very doxological. We are greeting this babe on a morning when we are ecstatic in our love and worship. And indeed, this hymn is primarily about giving glory and adoration. But it also gives us a little spoonful of theology that makes the adoration all the sweeter. We get the line, “Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.” This line could have sprung directly from the first few lines of the Gospel of John where John describes Christ as the Word of God. You remember, way back in the book of Genesis how God spoke the world into existence. Well, that speaking was the Word, and the Word was Christ, so Jesus was in on the very creation. Christ then is embedded in every word of the Bible from the beginning of the book to the very end.

When Christ appears on the pages of the Gospels then all the actions and Words of Jesus come with the authority of God and should be a guiding force in our lives. It is the arrival of this Word of God that we are celebrating. It is this renewal of the image of God in our world that we are eagerly viewing, and we are all doing it together as Christians in unity, focusing on that one image in that one moment in time.

Now let us sing together the third and final verse of “O Come, All Ye Faithful”:

*Sing choirs of angels, Sing in exultation!  
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!*

*Glory to God, all Glory in the highest!  
O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him,  
O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord.*

This stanza, no doubt, comes from Luke 2:13-14.

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” And back in verse 12 an Angel tells the shepherds, “This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

The coming of this Baby Jesus, the Christ Child, was a sign for the shepherds. The babe was a sign for Israel. Indeed, the child is a sign to the world today. A sign of peace, yes. But most of all, a sign of God’s abundant grace.<sup>2</sup> God’s grace and infinite love were shown plainly on that Christmas night so long ago. God sent this person to be our example, allowing us to see the image of God within ourselves. God sent this prophet to speak directly to us through the Gospels. God sent this king to rule our hearts. God sent this holy one to take on the burden of all the sins of the world!

What should our response be to this loving act of God that is manifested in this birth so long ago? A little child is born unto Mary, but not simply for Mary, but for all of us. Our response should be gratitude. Our response should be songs of adoration. And this is what we offer up to heaven, even as those angels did on that night so long ago.

You may imagine those shepherds, perhaps gathered around a fire. They are watching over their flocks. They are

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<sup>2</sup> NIB, Vol.IX, 65.

doing the tedious tasks that they have been doing all their lives. They are herding together their flocks. They are discussing where the best grazing land might be. They are binding up the broken leg of a lamb, or looking out for a wolf, or worse yet a lion. It has been a long and tedious and perhaps a monotonous day. And then those angels appear to them with this fantastic news! Their response is joy, yes. Their response is to go see this Christ Child, this wondrous sign. Verse 17 of our reading from Luke tells us, “When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.”

I think we are a little like these shepherds leading our work-a-day lives. And now, during this Christmas time we are confronted by this beautiful music, carrying this joyous message of good news! What do we do with this Good News? My friends, if we are like the shepherds we rejoice, we go to see the Christ Child in the Manger, and then we “spread the word concerning what has been told [us],” just like the shepherds did.

Please bow your heads and pray with me...

Heavenly Lord, you sent a choir of angels to bring your Good News to the shepherds that watched over their fields by night. You have sent us hymn after hymn and given us voices to sing them, carrying that same message. Lord, let us be like those shepherds. Let the words and music of these songs kindle a fire in our hearts and remind us that you are our God and we are your people.

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