

### **“God Rest You Merry!”**

The supreme time of singing has come again! That first Christmas morning broke upon a beaten, weary world, with triumphant singing, and so it has been ever since! “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to (people) on whom His favour rests”! People have not always grasped what they were singing about – but still they sang! And as they sang, joy and peace and good will became closer and more possible experiences . . .

Christmas without Carols would be like “apple pie without cheese”, or a “kiss without a squeeze”! They are part and parcel of our Christmas celebrations - and remember - Christmas is a “Twelve Day Festival”! So while the world “out there” will change the music to celebrate the coming New Year – let’s keep Christmas in our homes, keep the carols playing, or humming in our heads, as we go about our usual labors every day until January 5<sup>th</sup>! Remember, carols are singing about our faith as Christians!

We are blessed with many carols to sing, or play for others to sing them to us. If you look at our carols closely, you will find that they usually fall into one of 3 categories: (1) those which simply **tell the facts** of the birth of our Lord, without commentary; (2) those which speak of the **Mystery and Miracle** of that birth - of the fact of ***Incarnation*** - of God become Man; (3) and then there are those carols **which sing of our response** to what God has for us, for humankind, in “the little town of Bethlehem”.

This is not the place or time to comment on examples of all 3 categories, but I would like to draw your attention this Christmas Eve to a familiar carol that belongs in category (1), and perhaps you have guessed it from the title of the Sermon: “God rest you

merry, gentlemen”!

This is one of the many English carols that have come down to us **without** signature or authorship. As one of the oldest existing carols in use, it dates from **mid-16<sup>th</sup>** century, the “Golden age of the Christmas Carol”. The traditional English melody to which it is sung is set in the **minor** mode. Its earliest edition in print dates from **1829** – presumably up till then, it was committed to memory, like many other Carols for Christmas tide. It is quite possible that it was sung to the gentry by the **town watchmen** who thus earned additional money during the Christmas season. Charles Dickens in his classic work, “**A Christmas Carol**” (1843), refers to it thusly - and I quote - “*at the first sound of “God rest you merry Gentlemen”, Scrooge seized his ruler with such energy of action that the singer fled in terror*”!

The message of the Carol tells the basic facts of the Biblical story, and then concludes with the invitation for all of us to embrace each other with “true love and brotherhood”. This “holy tide of Christmas” is able to make us **one** with each other, **breaking down** divisions that keep us apart, and **taking away** our fears and anxieties of daily living. They sing of Good News – of “tidings of comfort and joy”, for tonight, tomorrow, and for whatever days God has laid up for our future . . .

So the message is **familiar** to us. But there is something special about this carol! It’s right there in the text and we probably slip over it quite quickly in our singing of it. In fact, it’s right there in the **opening** line – a **comma**! Yes – that little mark of punctuation! Regrettably this carol is **not** in the hymnbooks we use in St. Matthew’s, but if you have other carol books at home – **check it out!** Its location in the opening words makes **a world of difference** to the meaning of this familiar carol! And if you ever

find it missing in the text – you can assume some ignorant printer or publisher knew nothing of its intent!

So what do I mean? Well, you can read the line like this - *“God rest you, merry gentlemen”*. If you put the comma **before** “merry”, then “merry” becomes an **adjective** modifying the noun “gentlemen”. It speaks of their character – they are “merry” men!

**But if you leave the comma**, where it is – **after** “merry” – then you are reading and singing it as the author intended. He is saying - “God rest you merry, gentlemen!” (And I may add in this day “gentle women”!) The word “Merry” has now become an **adverb that modifies the only verb** in the line - which is “rest”. It now **describes** the “resting”, **not** the gentlemen! The “resting” is “merry” and it is so because of the **One who makes it thus** – the One who is the **subject** of the verb - and that is **God!** The intent of the phrase is for all to whom it is addressed –**“be glad and joyful”**. Remember what God has done for you! The phrase was often used at times of social parting . . . .

This is one of our oldest carols, as I have already said, and when it was written **“Merry” could be an adverb** as used by the unknown writer. So he is saying - it is **God alone** who is able to “rest you merry” – who can make you “glad and joyful” - that’s what He wants us to sing about!

Merriment and making merry are on the minds of many people as always when the Christmas season arrives for another year - even those who in this past week have been touched with sadness over the death of their loved ones. They struggle to be “merry”, holding back their sadness and tears, putting on a brave face before us. The terrible recent tragedy at the **Christmas Market in Berlin** is putting faith and goodwill to an extreme test.

Many are calling for **retaliation** – “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth for a tooth”.

But this carol speaks of a **better** way - indeed, the **only way** that is in keeping with Christmas, of God who “rests us merry”! How does He do this? In and by what He does – **He stoops** to save us. **He enters into** the fabric of human history to become a **full** part of it – forever! **He comes** “to save us all from Satan’s power when we were gone astray”, through Calvary’s Cross. **Isn’t that Good News** worth hearing? And worth singing about? “Tidings of comfort and joy”! We are **not alone** in the darkness of this world, or the darkness of our individual lives on this “night of nights”!

**God is**, and **God is with us**, and **God is for us**, in Mary’s baby, born in Bethlehem. That is the **Good News** that every Christmas brings into our lives! He is the **source** of our merriment, for today, tomorrow and always! Come and adore Him – see Him in His cradle - stoop down and believe - again!

At this another celebration of the birth of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, let us not miss the **merriment** and the **joy** that God has sent into this world in His Beloved Son. So His Word, and my prayer for you this night is [-

**“God rest you merry” - gentle people!**

**AMEN**