

December 24, 2020
Christmas Eve

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

Grace, mercy and peace, be to from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. As I've done in the past, and actually in looking back over my notes, I've been doing this now for 17 years. On Christmas Eve, we've been taking a look at some of our favorite Christmas hymns or carols. What's the story behind them? What led to them being written? Because oftentimes when we know that story, the song itself takes on new meaning.

Tonight's is going to be just a little bit different because it's going to start out dealing with something that well, isn't real religious, shall we say. It's a tune, a very popular tune, it goes by the name of “Greensleeves.” Some have called it a ‘haunting melody.’ It's also known by many as a pub tune from England. It was registered to a musician named Richard Jones in 1580. It was actually used by Shakespeare in his comedy, The Merry Wives of Windsor. It is said that Henry the eighth took this tune and wrote lyrics to it as he courted Anne Boleyn. There are more than 20 known sets of lyrics. Actually, when it comes to this tune, ‘Greensleeves,’ and almost every one of them is related to the pubs in England; though I must say one of those even mentions God in the last verse. While it was well known in England as a pub tune primarily, in fact, it was so well known that in the 19th century it was rated on an equal level with the song ‘God save the Queen.’ The world really didn't know it. And the world really didn't embrace it, until a gentleman by the name of William Chatterton Dix came along.

William Chatterton Dix, an Englishman, born in 1837. He was an insurance man by trade and by just the age of 25, he managed the Marine Insurance Company in Glasgow Scotland. However, insurance wasn't his love, poetry was. He was a poet at heart. His father had actually written a biography of Thomas Chesterton, the one who William Chatterton Dix was named after; and so, it was his father who encouraged his son to follow in the steps of Thomas Chesterton and become a poet.

His friends who recognized this in him and they accused him of pursuing poetry as his real passion and not his job, or anything else. In fact, both to his friends and to those who worked with him is his job at the insurance company, The Marine Insurance Company seemed like a sideline venture to him. There was just one problem, he wasn't a very good poet. His poetry how to wide range of subjects, that oftentimes were intermingled with his thoughts and with each other; and the result was a lot of disjointed poetry that just didn't make sense until, a near fatal illness confined him to his bed for many months. Lying there in bed thinking about his mortality, his focus swiftly shifted from poetry and reading stories about poets, to his faith. And he began reading the words of many great theologians, which led him to actually, begin to read The Bible. He saw Christ as his savior. He saw Christ as the fulfillment of prophecy. He also saw Christ as the only one who could heal him and literally, change his life. Including by chance, or by divine purpose, his skill poetry. You see when he recovered, he again began to write poetry, but now his poetry is focused. They were spiritual poems or spiritual hymns. In fact, we have a couple of hymns written by him, well known ones. Alleluia sing to Jesus, and As with Gladness Men of Old, one of our favorite epiphany songs.

But you know at the time, in the 19th century, Christmas wasn't a big celebration. People were afraid of Pagan overtones creeping into it. They frowned on gift giving, they really didn't do any decorating, and in fact, much of that was forbidden. So, it is rather unusual that he wrote a Christmas Poem. And it's also equally unique that this individual, who loved poetry but had been just really terrible; was able to sit down in one session and write his poem that he titled The Manger Throne. Christ was the sole focal point of this poem. Gone were his meandering thoughts, and different subjects.

Christ; and yet the poem was written as if it was written by a confused visitor. A confused visitor to Bethlehem, a confused visitor that saw the Angels greet the shepherds as the shepherds were standing watch. And then those shepherds themselves going to Bethlehem and watching; standing guard as it were, at the manger. The Angels singing; and yet while the Angel is singing and the Shepherds stand guard, here is this baby, the promised Messiah, in a manger. Why in a manger?

Where the ox and the ass are feeding. Why? Well, he tells us, “Christian listen, for sinners here at the Manger Throne, we'll find that God’s Word is pleading to them. Pleading for them to see that nails, spears shall pierce Him through. A Cross be borne for me for you. This baby, Jesus, was born for you, so that He might bear a cross. This baby, the Word made flesh; this is what the wise men came to sing. This is why they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh and why we now bring our gifts to our LORD. Our gifts of song and praise, adoration. Yes tithes, offerings, but most of all, ourselves as his children, as his servants.

You see, for William Chatterton Dix, the manger throne, was replaced by his heart’s throne, and that's where Christ sat, on the throne of his heart. And so, he tells us those who have Christ on the throne of their heart. “Raise the song on high, praise His name! Joy, joy, for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary.”

This poem, the Manger Throne, was combined with Greensleeves, the pub song. But it was done in the last year of the civil war. It made its way across the Atlantic to the United States. And it's a song that became a song of the peace, a song of unity, a song of celebration that could be son by North and South together. And now it is a beloved Carol ever since, and yet the message is still the exact same. Is He still in the Manger Throne? Or has He found a throne in your heart?

In our Saviors Name, Amen.