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## Editorial

# God Rest Ye Merry

*On Celebrating the Darker Meaning of Christmas by Wilfred M. McClay*

A number of years ago, our friend Joseph Bottum, editor of *First Things*, made a nice observation about his experiences of successive Christmases, one that has stuck in my mind as equally true for me, and perhaps for many of us. He observed that every year there seems to be a particular Christmas carol that grabs his attention early in the season, often because one particular line or image in that carol suddenly opens itself, revealing a fresh meaning that he'd never before noticed.

I've had the same experience. I remember being struck a couple of years ago when, in listening to the French carol we call "O Holy Night," a song I always tended to find both schmaltzy and tedious, I noticed the words "Long lay the world in sin and error pining,/ Till he appeared, and the soul felt its worth."

Maybe it was just a quirk of timing, but those last six words hit me with unexpected force, and I wondered why I had never noticed them before, even though I'd long ago committed the lyrics to memory. It could have been partly because there are several extant "translations" into English, which vary in the way they render that phrase (and bear little resemblance to the French). But the more general point stands. And I now listen to "O Holy Night" with new respect.

I believe others have similar tales to tell, of carols that somehow come suddenly to life for them. The experience of hearing and singing and sharing these familiar carols every year, year after year, is like the best experience of liturgy, in its combination of familiarity and fresh moments of

discovery, when universally known words that have for years passed through one's lips in rote repetition suddenly blaze forth with meaning, vividly and achingly true.

Like the oldest and best liturgies, these songs are no one's personal property, time and usage having wiped away nearly all distracting fingerprints of authorship and "originality." Instead, they belong to all of us. They are old friends to us, and like the best old friends, they are comfortable and reassuring, and yet also full of mysteries and surprises and strange, hidden delights. Our Christmas carols are among the most precious shared possessions of our fragmenting, fraying culture, and for all that we abuse them and demean them, they seem to remain imperishable.

This year, somehow it's been "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" that has stuck in my brain, and particularly these words, in the first verse: "To save us all from Satan's power/ When we were gone astray." We move through these sibilant words so quickly and rhythmically. I know I always have. And yet how plainly those few words sketch in a somber background, a whole universe of presuppositions without which the song has a very different, and diminished, meaning.

The merriness being urged upon the gentlemen (one should always remember that, in the lyrics, there is a comma between "merry" and "gentlemen"—they are not "merry gentlemen" being encouraged to "rest") comes amid a great darkness, a darkness that never disappears, that beckons and threatens, a darkness whose presence is subtly conveyed by the minor key with which the song begins and ends. The black ship with black sails lingers on the far horizon, silent and waiting.

### **Dark Reminders**

There are constant reminders of this darkness, if one has ears to hear them, running through the great liturgy of our Christmas carols, with their memorable evocations of bleak midwinter, snow on snow, sad and lonely plains, the curse, the half-spent night. The spooky and antiseptically sterile depiction of winter in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and its cinematic adaptations is, in that sense, very close to the spirit of the older carols, and to the biblical account of the matter—much closer than the hearty merriment of rosy-cheeked seasonal songs like "Sleigh Ride" or "Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow."

The older lyrics are laced with just such evocations of darkness. They help us remember why it is symbolically right, even if historically wrong, to celebrate Christ's birth in winter.

We are constantly reminded to "keep Christ in Christmas" and to remember "the reason for the season." And of course we should. But, if I may be permitted to put it this way, we must also keep Satan in Christmas, and not skip too lightly over the lyrics that mention him.

For he and the forces he embodies are an integral part of the story. It utterly transforms the way we understand Christmas, and our world, when we also hold in our minds a keen awareness of the darkness into which Christ came, and still must come, for our sake.

Later in “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” the visiting angel tells the shepherds in the field that Christ has come “To free all those who trust in him/ From Satan’s power and might.” Being subject to that “power and might” is, as we are likely to put it these days, the default setting of our human existence. But the Christmas story plays havoc with all such defaults.

It reveals the putatively normal and settled features of our world to be something very different: the ruins and aftereffects of a great and ancient calamity, the tokens of a disordered order. It lifts the veil of illusion about who we are and what we were made to be. Which means that the “comfort and joy” of which the song speaks are not merely outbursts of seasonal jollity.

### **Captives’ Gratitude**

They bespeak the ecstatic gratitude of captives and cripples who recognize that, in and through Christ, the entire cosmos has been transformed, and their lives have been made new. Nothing can ever be the same again.

The darkness does not go away. Not now, not yet. But the light that shines into it can make even the bleakest midwinter into a landscape glistening with promise. So may it be for each of us, this and every Christmas.

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