



The great poet and English writer, William Shakespeare, wrote, "*To thine own self be true and it shall follow as the night, the day, that thou canst not be false to any man.*" **Hamlet, Act 1, scene 3.** Indeed, the struggle against self is the greatest war we can ever wage. The Arabs say: "The greatest Jihad is against one's own soul." Pity they have never applied that one. But there is much truth to this personal struggle that is constant and unceasing beneath the muscles and sinews of the heart. The most devastating and disparaging war America ever fought was against herself - her own citizens and family - the War Between the States.

A certain Harvard professor, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, composed the poem that serves as the literary basis for the Christmas Song, *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*. Following a series of heart-breaking reversals, i.e. tragic death of his wife and the serious wounding of his son in the Union Army, Longfellow had given up all hope of peace and concord among men. But as he despaired on Christmas Day of 1863 about the sad state of affairs, he suddenly realized that he was overlooking a most important truth - the sovereignty of God over the affairs of men. So he wrote Christmas Bells.

Christmas Bells

I HEARD the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men

It is noteworthy this song was written by a Harvard professor (Longfellow). It is even more noteworthy the motto of Harvard College since 1692 was, and still is, "**Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae**" which translated from Latin means "**Truth for Christ and the Church.**" *It would perhaps be more accurately, "How far art thou fallen!"* But Harvard College, like many other American Institutions, was once a Fountainhead of Truth, Learning, and Godly Wisdom. Consider other Christmas hymns, carols, and songs that were given to us by Harvard men:

- 1) *It came upon a Midnight Clear* by Edmund Hamilton Sears (Class of 1837) in 1847;
- 2) *O Holy Night* was produced by John Sullivan Dwight (Class of 1832) in 1849;
- 3) *O Little Town of Bethlehem* was written by an Episcopal Bishop, Phillips Brooks (Class of 1855) and published in 1868;
- 4) *Sleigh Ride* was written by Leroy Anderson (Class of 1829) and published in 1848;
- 5) *Jingle Bells* was composed by James Lord Pierpoint, son of Rev. John Pierpoint.

Though the latter two songs do not reflect the true and full glory of the Christmas message, they nonetheless point to the general view of the veneration of Christmas to Americans of the era - even at Harvard!

So Longfellow, walking the lonely streets of Boston on Christmas day, forlorn and sorrowful, suddenly heard the bells of a nearby church chiming a Christmas carol. He suddenly awoke from his stupor of misery and thought of the greatness of God - even in times of dire hardship.

I HEARD the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It is through the *old familiar carols* and hymns of the church that our mundane lives are reminded to return back to the God of our Salvation. They remind us of something quite valuable buried deep in our hearts perhaps by a mother while we sat at her feet as a child. True hymns and carols have a power of recall to us. The repetition of truth in hymns and carols endears those truths to our hearts and souls.

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

The powerful voice of the Church Universal and Militant can be discovered in a single line of Holy hymnody. When this fact is realized, it seems that the whole world of Christendom suddenly joins, as it should, in one grand voice of praise to God. The song of the Angels to the poor shepherds overlooking sleepy Bethlehem suddenly seems to become an unbroken refrain from the moment they were first proclaimed from the brilliantly-lighted skies. You will remember the story well: "*And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*" (Luke 2:9-14)

The sorrowful heart of Longfellow rallied deep in his soul.

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Yes, the earth revolved as it has from the moment it was flung into space by the hand of God. It has not ceased to revolve, and neither has the great message of the Angels ceased to inspire and make joyful the heart of man. See, it is all as God has planned from Eternity Past. The earth keeps her place, and God's truth, even more so, is unchanging in its promises. Creation began the first day at night (in darkness) and each succeeding day was completed in glorious light of day. ("*The evening and the morning were the first day.*") God's creation began in darkness but ends in Light. Jesus Christ came on Christmas Day which began at night, but He was taken up in the splendor of heaven not only IN brilliant light, but as the Light of the World!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

We seldom see this verse included in the song. It makes reference to the iron-throated cannons belching out fire and death from both sides of the lines of combatants far to the South. The scourge of war may, for a time, drown out the beautiful songs of

the spirit; but wars shall someday cease and carols and hymns will win the day. Even in the heat of battle, there can be a spiritual peace that surpasses all understanding in the heart of the Christian.

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

See what ugly havoc war brings to a people who heretofore had lived at peace. In an instant, the outward peace can be shattered by a single barrage of artillery over a remote island (Fort Sumter) and the whole land experiences the conflagration that follows. The hearthstones of a continent are its families who have dwelt in peace and brotherly love; but war is a divider of hearts. Now, Longfellow sees that brother is pitted against brother, and all is forlorn of hope. "*Peace on earth, good will to men*" fades as the morning mist.

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

The strong point of faith is that faith is persistent. It is always chiming somewhere across the terrible musketry and horrible moans of battle. It is often revived at the very moment that all hope seems forlorn. That was the case with Longfellow. Suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, the mind latches on to a promise heard somewhere down the halls of time by the Christian: ". . . *weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.*" (Psalms 30:5) This is perhaps the promise that the Master whispered into the ear of the great poet that sad day in 1863. In our weak moments, we may believe that hate is stronger than love; that the mockery of Satan has silenced the song that God placed in our hearts. But, then, we will be reminded by the Holy Spirit: ". . . *greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.*" (1 John 4:4) At that moment, our hearts are made glad.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men

When the roar of the battlefield seems most deafening, there is a sudden prevailing of the voice of mercy to the believer. When evil is at its height, the voice of faith and righteousness peels evermore loudly and commandingly. The ancient truth prevails whether we acknowledge that truth or not. "*God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men.*"

It is Christmas. Have you heard those chimes that delighted Mr. Longfellow 150 years ago?