

Devotion on the Hymns of the Church (Hymn 33 - Silent Night) - 28 December 2013,
Anno Domini



And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David.) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:4-7)

The larger church world does not realize that Christmas is a Season, and not a single day. Officially, Christmastide begins at sundown on 24th December and ends at sundown on 5th January. But even more than this, why should the warm spirits of affection and mutual respect not continue for all 365 days of the year? There can always be a silent and beautiful peace, even in the heat of the battlefield, if the Holy Spirit rules in the heart. The inward peace of the Christian is not dependent upon the outward conflagration of the world about. Today's hymn selection, Silent Night, is one of the Crown Jewels of the Christmas Season ... and of every season.

The words to this hymn carol were written by a Catholic priest, Joseph Mohr, and the music (Stille Nacht) composed by his church musician, Franz Xavier Gruber, in 1815 in a little church in the Austrian Alps village of Oberndorf. It was discovered, just days before the beginning of Christmastide, that mice had eaten holes in the church organ ballast. There was no means of repairing the organ before Christmas Eve. Joseph Mohr meditated on the occasion. Early on the morning of Christmas Eve, he visited a family in the mountains in order to Christen their newborn baby. As he trudged home in the snow, he paused to consider the beauty of the mother and father as they loved and caressed their little baby. He also felt the perfect peace and quiet of the snow-clad mountains and valleys that surrounded him. Without a great deal of human thought and effort (it was from God) the words to this hymn filled the heart of the simple priest. He went home and recorded the words that have become immortal to us ever since that Christmas Eve at which Silent Night was first sung to the accompaniment of guitar at a little mountain church in Oberndorf.

Silent Night! Holy Night!
Silent night, holy night,
all is calm, all is bright
round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace.
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night,
shepherds quake at the sight,
glories stream from heaven afar,
heavenly hosts sing alleluia;
Christ, the Savior, is born!
Christ, the Savior, is born!

Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's pure light
radiant beams from thy holy face,
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord at thy birth.
Jesus, Lord at thy birth.

The title of this hymn draws our attention immediately to the counsel of God in the Psalms of David: "Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth." (Psalms 46:10) God speaks most powerfully when man, and his world, is silent and still. So, after four centuries between Malachi's prophecy and the preaching of John the Baptist intervened a long silence of God speaking to man. The silence of the centuries made our eyes and ears keen to that stellar event that occurred in that other little sleepy village - Bethlehem of Judah (meaning: House of Bread and Praise). How appropriate that the Bread of Heaven (John 6:35) should be born in Bethlehem - a place, as well, for raising sacrificial lambs for the sacrifice in the Temple.

The priest, Mohr, could visualize the peace and quiet that surrounded Mary in the rural barnyard scene. Had the birth occurred in Jerusalem at some opulent king's palace, Silent Night would never have been written. "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright. Round yon virgin mother and child. Holy Infant, so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace." The night truly was Holy. Even the dark night can be bright when Christ is present. It seems ironic that Jesus - the King of Kings - would be born in such surroundings; or that He would come as a tender, loving baby. He slept in peace for a time, but the world would have none of it! That same Jesus shall return leading the Armies of the Heavenly Host.

The ambient light of the stars above illumined the lonely hills overlooking Jerusalem where shepherds "kept watch over their flocks by night." "Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight, glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing alleluia; Christ, the Savior, is born! Christ, the Savior, is born!" When the peace and solitude of the star-studded night is suddenly punctuated by the light and terrible beauty of a great Angel, it is not surprising that the shepherds would quake at the sight. It was, no doubt, a startling vision. Streams of light followed in the train of the Angel, and cast its warm beams all around the hillside on which the shepherds were keeping watch. The glories of Light always accompany the presence of God and His Angels.

There is no distance that cannot be instantly breeched by such light - even from heaven, so distant from the ways of mankind. The news was simple and, yet, most profound: "Christ, the Savior, is Born!" Has there ever been a shorter, or more profound, message than this? I have heard it argued that Easter Season is the most important of the Church Calendar, but Easter could never have occurred without that Christmas event of 2013 years ago - a moment so profoundly important that our calendar (Gregorian) dates all time with that event at its center.

The Light of Christ is made warm with His immeasurable LOVE. Before Christ, men sat in darkness and fear. With His Coming, He brought an added dimension to the Law of God - LOVE. From that Love hangs all the laws and commandments. "Silent Night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light, radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord at thy birth. Jesus, Lord at thy birth." It must never be forgotten that Jesus is the literal Son of God. We, too, are sons and daughters of God, but in a different manner of birth. We are sons and daughters by ADOPTION, but Jesus is the very substance of the Father as His only Begotten Son. The word BEGOTTEN makes all the difference, and it is this term that the new bible versions wish to delete. By so doing, they attempt to bring Christ down to our own level. Shame, shame! The beams of Light and Love literally stream from the face and presence of Christ. If He abides in your heart, you cannot shield the emanating rays of light and love that extends from that heart to all around. The birth of Christ was the very Dawn of Redeeming Grace. Jesus redeemed us from our sins - not because we deserved to be redeemed, but because of His love and grace. There is no other way to salvation except by grace and mercy. Our works will not suffice an iota. Have you known that grace that beams from Bethlehem and our Lord Jesus Christ?

Merry Christmas this Christmastide, but also for every day of the year and future years.

Nothing else matters if Jesus had not been born in Bethlehem!