

Joy to the World; A Reflection



SLIDE ONE – HOLDING SLIDE

LEADER'S NOTES

Around this time every year, we begin to hear songs and carols that are very familiar to us. So familiar that sometimes we forget to listen to the messages they contain.

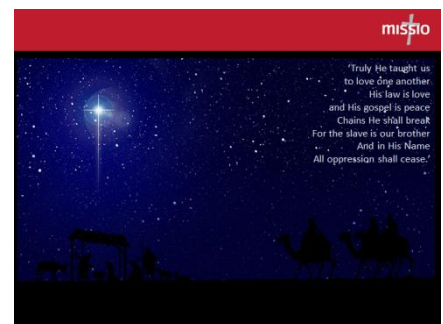
This morning we're going to focus on one such carol and the fascinating story connected to it.

Let's see how many of you can guess the carol by the lyrics on the next screen.



SLIDE TWO

*'He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.'*



It's 'Joy to the World', the second most recorded Christmas song of the last century and a Gospel choir favourite. But when it was first written in 1719 there were few church choirs who would have dared sing it as it was considered too radical!

'Joy to the World' was written by Isaac Watts, who, as a young man, became increasingly frustrated with the music he heard in church. Isaac felt that the hymns used old fashioned language and dull melodies that failed to inspire. He shared his complaints with his father who was, himself, a church pastor. In response Isaac's father set his son a challenge. If Isaac was unhappy with the hymns, rather than just moan, he should do something about it, he should write new ones.

'Joy to the World' was just one of many hymns that Isaac wrote following his father's challenge. They were warmly welcomed by people who found them easier to follow and more enjoyable to sing. But Isaac's new way of communicating God's message wasn't liked by all. It may seem strange for us today, but many hugely disapproved of Isaac's use of contemporary language and rhyme. They felt the changes were too radical!

Fittingly the message within 'Joy to the World' spoke of another radical change. From his birth Jesus changed people's understanding of who God was, but this was another change not welcomed by all.

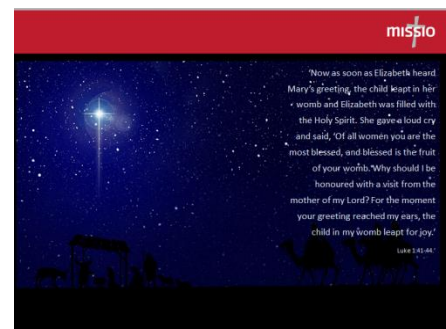
For centuries the people of Israel had expected a powerful and imposing Messiah who would enter the world majestically. So when God chose to be born as a vulnerable baby to working class parents, in a temporary shelter and surrounded social outcasts* some struggled to believe this was the promised Saviour. For them Jesus' birth didn't sound right. Surely God was too high to stoop down to this lowly level?

For others, the birth of Jesus was a cause of great joy. They understood that being born this way, God's first message to the world was that He wanted to be one with us and that all are welcome in his presence. A person's background or status did not matter to God. What mattered was that they made space for Christ and for others in their hearts. No one was to be considered unworthy of God's love and our respect.

SLIDE THREE

The scripture on screen captures this well. It recalls the meeting between Mary, pregnant with Jesus, and her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth's initial feeling that she unworthy to be visited by Christ and his mother is soon overcome by a sense of joy, and not just her own joy but that of her baby too!

Invite a student to read the scripture on slide



'Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord? For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy.'

Luke 1:41-44

Jesus' birth showed the world that God wanted to relate to us in a new way, so that we could learn directly from Him how to live and love well. As an adult Jesus reinforced this message through his actions, his words, his death and resurrection. And the mission Jesus set his followers was clear; they were to love others as he loved them. They, and now we, are to share God's love and mercy with the world and we are to do so joyfully.

And it was this new way of communicating God's love for the world that Isaac Watts tried to convey in his ground-breaking carol. As our closing prayer, let's listen to 'Joy to the World'. As you listen (and maybe sing), consider new ways you could communicate God's love in today's world; maybe through music like Issac, through social media, or as Jesus did through selfless acts of mercy and love.

*Shepherds spent months working in the mountains and earned very little. Unable to attend synagogue they were often ostracised. The shepherds represented those excluded from society due to poverty and prejudice. The Wise men from the East represented foreign and pagan nations, people also excluded from the religious community due to fear and prejudice.

We recommend you use one of the YouTube clips below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kqi8aphPtNQ> Vineyard - Joy To The World [with lyrics] 2.52 mins

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gh0fJbuZx_w Joy to the World (Lyric Video) 2.26 mins