

# 'O Holy Night'

## 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.

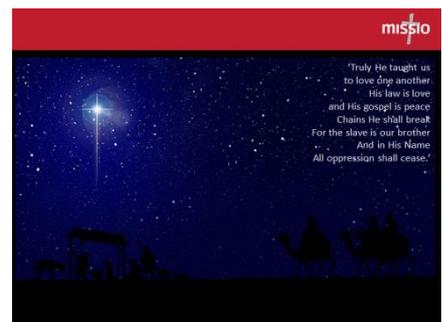
Today we're going to focus on one such carol and the fascinating story of how it came to be.

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



### SLIDE TWO

*'Truly He taught us to love one another  
His law is love and His gospel is peace  
Chains He shall break  
For the slave is our brother  
And in His Name  
All oppression shall cease.'*



It's called 'O Holy Night' and it's one of the most popular carols of the last century. But it was written way before then. Can anyone guess when the carol was written? The lyrics on screen provide a clue.

The carol was written in France in 1847 during a time when the practice of slavery was being challenged and changed across the world.

The movement to end slavery was started in England around 1790 by a group of committed Christians. Inspired by the example of Christ, they recognised that God's commandment that we love one another could never permit the denial of a person's dignity.

The birth of Jesus helped us understand that we are made in God's image and that we have a dignity beyond measure. So what better way to remind people of this lesson, than in a Christmas carol. Yet 'O Holy Night' wasn't written by one of these committed Christians, but by a French wine waiter and a Jewish composer.

Invited by his local priest to produce a Christmas poem for the parish and inspired by the Gospel of St Luke, the wine waiter made it his mission to write words that spoke of the justice and joy Christ's birth would bring. Later he would ask his Jewish friend to set the words to music and the result was a hit in France.

A decade later, a shy American writer heard the carol and decided his mission was to share the message of 'O Holy Night' in the US.

In 1857 America was divided over the issue of slavery. But the writer firmly believed that 'O Holy Night' could help Americans see that Christ was born to free all people from injustice and fear. The shy writer wanted to share this message as widely as possible and the carol provided an ingenious way to do so.

'O Holy Night' became a huge hit and helped change the nation's hearts. By 1865, after four years of civil war, slavery was outlawed in America.

But the reach of 'O Holy Night' didn't end there. Forty one years later an ambitious scientist was on another mission – to work out how to transmit the human voice over the radio; up to then only coded impulses could be sent across the airwaves.

### SLIDE THREE

After months of hard work the scientist finally found a way to transmit speech. On Christmas Eve 1906 he picked up a microphone and over the airwaves read the story of Jesus' birth from the Gospel of St Luke. *Invite a student to read the scripture on slide.*

After he spoke, the scientist picked up his violin and played 'O Holy Night'. The carol was the first piece of music to be transmitted over the radio! To radio operators on ships crossing the oceans and in communications offices across America it must have sounded miraculous!

For a third time in history 'O Holy Night' helped share the message of Christ's birth and God's call for justice. But it's important to remember that this couldn't have happened without the help of a few unlikely instruments: a wine waiter, a Jewish composer, a shy American writer, and an ambitious scientist.

All of these individuals used their abilities to share the message of God's love with the world; just as we are called to do as followers of Christ. Even if we seem unlikely missionaries – like those we've heard of today – God can use us to create a world where justice, mercy, joy, and peace reign; a world that Jesus taught us to build. But we must be ready to take on this mission, not just at Christmas but all year round.

As our closing prayer, let's listen to 'O Holy Night'. As you listen to (and maybe sing?) the carol, reflect on its message and ask God for the courage to be a missionary of His love in today's world too.

*We recommend you use one of the YouTube clips below, as not all versions contain lyrics referred to in this reflection:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNyJd94iTKE> O Holy Night (Official Lyric Video) - Bethel Music Kids | Christmas Party 4.06 mins

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjl1stjDVZ0> O Holy Night LYRICS (4.42 but can end after 3.40).

