

Hymn Study

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Background

- Author – Phillips Brooks (1835-1891)
 - Episcopalian, one of the most popular preachers of his day.
 - Led Trinity Church in Boston from 1869-1891.
- Tune
 - There are two tunes traditionally used with this song.
 - ST. LOUIS – used in the U.S.
 - Written by Trinity Church's organist, Lewis Redner
 - Written the night before its first practice.
 - FOREST GREEN – used in the U.K.
 - Based on an English folk song called "The Ploughboy's Dream"
 - Adapted into a hymn tune by Ralph Vaughan Williams in 1906.
- History
 - Inspired by Brooks' visit to the Holy Land in 1865, which included being in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve.
 - Written in 1868 for the Sunday School children to sing in a program at Trinity Church.
 - Printed in leaflet form shortly after its debut, then in *Church Porch* in 1874.
- Analysis
 - Meter – Irregular, 8.6.8.6.7.6.8.6.
 - Rhyme – ABCBDEFE or ABCB x2
 - Brooks' approach to the Nativity is romanticized and deeply intimate, linking the quiet arrival of Christ on earth with personal salvation.

Text Analysis

- Verse 1
 - O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie:
 - Micah 5:2, Matthew 2:6
 - Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by;
 - Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the Everlasting Light;
 - Isaiah 60:19-20, John 1:4-5
 - The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.
- Verse 2
 - For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above,
 - Luke 2:4-7, Matthew 1:18-25
 - While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.
 - Luke 2:8-14

- O morning stars, together, proclaim the holy birth!
 - Job 38:7
- And praises sing to God the King and peace to men on earth.
 - Luke 2:14
- Verse 3
 - How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n;
 - *We shift here from the historical birth of Christ to the spiritual New Birth.*
 - Isaiah 53:2, John 3:16, Romans 6:23
 - So God imparts to human hearts the blessing of His heaven;
 - John 3:16, Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 15:29
 - No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
 - Where meek souls will receive Him still the dear Christ enters in.
 - Matthew 5:5, Revelation 3:20
- Verse 4 – Not Used
 - Where children pure and happy, pray to the blessed Child:
 - Describing children as “pure” is more romantic than Scriptural – Romans 3:10, etc.
 - Matthew 19:13-14
 - Where Misery cries out to Thee, Son of the undefiled;
 - Lamentations 3:19
 - Where Charity stands watching, and Faith holds wide the door,
 - Revelation 3:20,
 - The dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once more.
 - Not that Christ is born anew physically, but that He moves to meet our spiritual needs just as He did in His arrival at Bethlehem.
- Verse 5
 - O Holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us, we pray,
 - Acts 4:27-30
 - Cast out our sin, and enter in, Be born in us today;
 - *The metaphor of salvation as Christ being born within us is not strictly Scriptural. I could not find such a comparison in the Bible but could have missed it. John 3 speaks of the sinner being born again, but not Christ being born in us. This does not make the metaphor invalid but does lend caution to its use.*
 - Ephesians 3:17
 - We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
 - Luke 2:10-14
 - O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel!
 - Isaiah 7:14