

BETHLEHEM

CAROLS UNPACKED

Creative ideas for Christmas carol services

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with *BibleLands*

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INTRODUCTION

CAROLS AND CAROL SINGING: A BRIEF HISTORY

A carol is a joyful religious song created and sung by ordinary people. The root meaning of the word ‘carol’ is ‘to dance in a ring’ and probably came from the Old French *caroller*, through the Latin *choraula* and, originally, the Greek *choros*, which was a circling dance. Traditional carols are essentially joyful. Even when the subject is solemn, the music is lively and the words trip easily off the tongue.

Carols first became popular in the 15th century as earlier restrictions on music and drama in church decreased. Some carols had pagan roots but were adapted to the Christian faith, along with other customs. Their subjects are down-to-earth and include references to plants and animals, food and drink. ‘The holly and the ivy’ and ‘Here we come a wassailing’ are popular examples of carols in which a Christian dimension has been added to these subjects. The church sang Gregorian chant in Latin, while the people sang and danced to carols in the street, the home and the inn.

Most carols that have survived are connected with Advent and Christmas, but there are also carols to be sung at Easter, on saints’ days and at different seasons of the year. The style varies: many have skipping rhythms, some have choruses and others are narratives in the style of ballads. All Christian nations have carols; those of France are called *Noels*, a word that probably came into English as ‘Nowell’ through the Normans. The origins of this word are discussed in more detail in the chapter on ‘The first Nowell’.

In the 17th century, when the Puritans disapproved of celebrating religious feasts, including Christmas, and dancing was banned, carol singing declined and was almost forgotten. In 1871, however, *Christmas Carols New and Old* by Revd H.R. Bramley and Dr John

Stainer was published and brought 13 traditional carols and some original compositions into wide and popular use. The effect of this book was enormous. Some of the arrangements were weak and rather pious but the restoration of the traditional carol is largely owed to them. It was gradually recognized that, with the advent of universal education and wider travel, the great wealth of folk music, including carols, was in danger of being lost. Composers including Ralph Vaughan Williams collected and published many traditional words and melodies in the *English Hymnal* (1906) and the *Oxford Book of Carols* (1928).

The last 70 years has shown a continuous increase in carol services, along with Festivals of Nine Lessons and Carols, first devised in Truro Cathedral and later popularized by annual broadcasts from King's College, Cambridge. For example, the service records of Gloucester Cathedral record no carol services before 1930, but by 1990 a carol service was being held almost every evening during the fortnight before Christmas. Today, carol services are held in almost every church and school as well as numerous concert halls. New arrangements of carols are published every year, and seasonal CDs are increasingly popular.

The *Bethlehem Carol Sheet* has done much to make carols from every part of the world available to carol singers and services. The eleven items chosen for this book cover a wide range of styles, periods and traditions. Only 'God rest you merry, gentlemen' and 'The first Nowell' are traditional carols. The others range from hymns written to teach children in Sunday school (such as 'Once in royal David's city' and 'Away in a manger') to a biblical text, 'While shepherds watched their flocks by night', which is a metrical version of Luke 2:8–14. Works by leading churchmen of their day include 'Hark! the herald-angels sing', an adaptation of words by Charles Wesley, the leading 18th-century hymn writer, set to music from Mendelssohn's oratorio *Festgesang*, and 'Good King Wenceslas' with original verses from J.M. Neale, who translated numerous early Greek and Latin hymns.

Carols were always modern in that they expressed the faith and ideas of ordinary people in their own age. Their charm lies in their being true to the culture of their time. Some of the poetry may be rough and the melodies simple, but their genuine expression of faith and life shows against sham antiquity or banality. Some comparatively modern works have kept the spirit of traditional carols in that they have been written by ordinary people for a specific purpose, often with music added by equally humble musicians. ‘We three kings’ and ‘Silent night’ are two of the best examples of modern compositions that have rightly passed into the rich heritage of carols and carol singing.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Christmas is a time for remembering Jesus’ own poverty and the needs of the homeless and disadvantaged. This results in an increased opportunity not only to give to national charities but also to respond to the desperate inequalities and needs of the wider world—especially in the lands where Jesus was born and carried out his ministry. Each of the well-known and well-loved carols in this book explores a particular project connected with and supported by BibleLands and, through this vehicle, the carol service can also be an ideal opening for congregations to act on these concerns through prayer and giving.

Against this background of expectations, longings and concerns, the collection in this book offers a way to blend the traditional with something new and original. Each carol includes a brief outline of the story behind its composition, together with notes on its content, meaning and biblical links. This information is intended primarily as background for those leading the carol service, but may also be useful in providing insights for an introduction to each carol, helping to place it within the framework of the service as a whole.

The eleven carols in this collection are the top eleven favourites

in BibleLands' ever popular *Bethlehem Carol Sheet*, which has been produced by the charity each year since 1953. The latest edition of the carol sheet, which includes 26 of the most popular Christmas carols and hymns, is available from BibleLands. Contact details are as follows:

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Unpacking the carols

Each of the carols (or Christmas hymns) in this book is unpacked in a variety of creative ways, including poetry, drama, material for under-fives, prayers, stories and ideas for sensory worship. The intention is to enable you to pick and mix the ideas by selecting just one of these approaches for each carol that you have chosen. For example, one carol could be introduced or followed by a short drama presentation; another might become the subject for a piece by an under-fives group; a further carol could be used to build up your nativity tableau for all ages at the front; another could be the stimulus for the prayers; a further carol could be linked to a reading and a short talk, or, as an alternative, become the inspiration for a story or piece of poetry read by older children. Finally, one carol should be reserved as the opportunity to present a creative piece about a project supported by BibleLands. Each carol in the book contains enough ideas to make this selection possible.

BibleLands PowerPoint presentation material

For more information about the work of BibleLands, together with a downloadable PowerPoint presentation of images relating to the projects referred to in the book, please go to www.biblelands.org.uk.

PLANNING A CAROL SERVICE

In many ways, a Christmas carol service should be one of the most straightforward acts of worship to put together each year. There is a definitive pool of readings and songs to work with and a short but powerful tradition to draw on. That legacy can become a challenge for the service planner, who dare not do anything too different, and for the congregation, who may be lulled into missing the real impact and meaning of the Christmas story through participation in something that has become overfamiliar.

One of the great opportunities presented by any carol service is that it may attract large numbers of less regular churchgoers, who are looking for that elusive mix of carols and nostalgia with which they feel comfortable (perhaps half remembered from when they were young), and may be feeling a deeper and unexpressed longing for something new to satisfy a spiritual hunger. In retelling the familiar story, there should be an opportunity for those present to grow in understanding of its eternal message while reflecting on its particular relevance in our own culture and time. Church attendance at Christmas can present a tremendous opportunity to use what is traditional to proclaim afresh the truth of the Christian faith.

Which carols should you choose? Nearly every carol is based on two short Bible passages: Luke 2:1–16 and Matthew 2:1–12. It is not easy to include all the old favourites (thus repeating the same information) while retaining a sense of movement. If you decide to use a carol that covers the whole Christmas story, this could come either at the beginning or near the end, to sum up the completed

narration. The longer version of 'O come, all ye faithful' or 'The first Nowell' are well-known examples.

There are, however, those carols that focus on specific aspects of the story and these lend themselves to being used throughout the service. For example, the story of the shepherds and the angels is told in carols such as 'God rest you merry, gentlemen' and 'While shepherds watched', the scene in the stable is portrayed in 'Silent night' and 'Away in a manger', care for those in poverty is the subject of 'Good King Wenceslas', and the visit of the wise men is recorded in 'We three kings'. Reflection on the significant part that the Christmas story plays in the bigger picture of salvation is the subject of 'Once in royal David's city', 'O little town of Bethlehem' and 'Hark! the herald-angels sing'.

There is often a concern that every carol used in the service must be 'known'. However, carols need not be restricted to the most popular Christmas hymns. Many traditional carols move away from the nativity narrative and are lively and easy to sing. Not included in this book, 'I saw three ships come sailing in' and the Sussex carol 'On Christmas night, all Christians sing' are well-known examples. In the same way, the format of Bible readings and carols should not be treated as binding. Poetry, drama and dance can be effective commentaries on the story, and the use of light and movement around the building can be powerful illustrations. Furthermore, if a church has few musical facilities, an informal 'Songs of Praise' could provide the opportunity to sing popular carols while allowing time for things to be said about the carols themselves and their meaning. This format may also attract people who do not enjoy a formal or lengthy service.

For a carol service that involves young children, a maximum of five or six carols is ideal, with the service lasting not more than 40 minutes. This is especially appropriate if you plan to include a special item from a choir or introduce a new carol. It is always good practice, however, for the final hymn or carol in any service to be short and lively. People will have stood and sung for longer than

usual and both the elderly and the young may feel fatigued or be ready to go home. Carols such as ‘Hark! the herald-angels sing’ sum up the theological message behind the Christmas story and allow the congregation to leave in a joyful frame of mind.

Each carol in the book has been given a specific subtitle that relates to the main theme of that carol, and this may be helpful in putting together a service with a particular focus, where that carol is central. You will then be able to make use of more than one creative idea from the selection given, while using other carols from the book (or elsewhere) in support.

Planning a carol service in a primary school

If you are involved in planning the carol service in a school, either as a teacher or as a member of the clergy or church team invited into the school as a guest, the ideas in this book should be helpful. The wealth of creative material available for each of the carols in the book lends itself well to special use within primary schools. One approach might be for each class to select one of the carols to explore as a class project. There is plenty of information to accompany each carol, along with the different approaches to explore it. Each class could then interpret and present their chosen carol to others. This could result in a creative carol concert at the school for friends, parents and carers or could perhaps form the basis for a service at the local church.

Worship space

Not all carol services take place in a church building, so the term ‘worship space’ has been used alongside references to the church as a building. The term ‘worship space’ denotes any space in which worship takes place, including a school hall or any other venue that is not a church building.

Involving under-fives

Much of the language and many of the theological concepts within the carols and Christmas hymns in this book are clearly beyond the understanding of very young children, but children may gain intuitively from being present in worship when these carols are sung. If young children are encouraged to feel part of the worship and appropriate ways are found to involve them, their hearts and spirits may still be touched by the experience. The activities described in the under-fives sections are designed to help young children to appreciate something of the messages and imagery contained within these popular carols, laying a foundation of positive encounter that can be built on in years to come.

Choosing which activities to use and how to organize them will depend on a number of factors related to your local situation, such as the nature of the service you are organizing, the layout of your worship space, the numbers of children involved and the availability of other adults. It is expected that young children are likely to encounter most of the carols in an all-age context where they will be accompanied by adult carers.

Sometimes it may be appropriate to put together simple activity packs that are given to each child (or their carers) as they arrive or given out at an appropriate time in the service. If you choose to do this, bear in mind that young children will probably want to do the activity as soon as they are given it, so it is worth thinking in advance of the point at which the activity would be most helpful. On other occasions, it might be more appropriate to gather groups of children at a particular time during the service to work on a creative activity. In this case, some activities may best be done while a carol is being sung, but others may best be done at an earlier part of the service so that they can be used during the singing of the carol.

Part Two

UNPACKING THE CAROLS



Away in a manger

STARS AND SALVATION

UNPACKING THE STORY BEHIND THE CAROL

No Christmas carol service is ever complete without this carol, not only because of the ‘ahh’ factor elicited by the sight of young children performing the nativity story but also because many people remember it as the first carol they themselves sang.

The first two verses of ‘Away in a manger’ were first published in 1885 in an American Lutheran Sunday school book. This created the misconception that the words were written by Martin Luther. The original author is, in fact, unknown. The most well-known melody, ‘Cradle Song’, which transformed the simple rhyme into a carol, was composed by William J. Kirkpatrick (1832–1921) in 1895, ten years after the carol was first published. Another popular melody is that of a Basque carol.

Perhaps the original author remained unaware of the fact that his or her words had become such a popular carol, which is why he or she remains, to this day, anonymous. The lyrics of the third verse (attributed to J.T. McFarland) were written ten years later than the melody, around 1906, so, 20 years from the carol’s conception, it seems that the original author was still unaware of how the piece had grown. Over 100 years on, the carol remains one of the best-loved carols of all time.

UNPACKING THE BIBLICAL STORY OF THE CAROL

The words of the carol, aided and abetted by the melody, form a simple lullaby. In the tradition of most lullabies, the sentiment is sweet and syrupy—a far cry from the real setting of Jesus’ birth. The first line is based on Luke 2:7. Each Christmas this verse is embellished many times over, with hosts of angels, innkeepers and their wives, donkeys, camels, shepherds, sheep and wise men all crowding on to the scene in the quest to create a part for each child in the nativity play.

The Bible verse simply says, ‘[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son. She dressed him in baby clothes and laid him on a bed of hay, because there was no room for them in the inn.’ The carol does not embellish the verse in the tradition of the nativity play. Instead, it homes in on the baby sleeping on his bed of hay in a rough and ready cattle trough. But there seems to be rather a lot of Vaseline on the camera lens. The reality of the event is indistinct and incomplete: the stars are twinkling in a bright sky; cattle are gently lowing; the baby doesn’t cry when he awakens. It all sounds idyllically peaceful, rather like the image you might find on a Christmas card. There is no mention of the dreadful reality of a young girl, far from home, having to give birth on a cold and dirty earthen floor. Victorian propriety has sanitized the event of Jesus’ birth and given it a warm and sentimental aura in the carol, suitable for delicate, well-bred children, dressed in their Sunday best.

There can be little doubt that the carol was composed with young children in mind. This theory is further supported by the animation of the stars looking down at the sleeping baby and, indeed, by the scene shift in the second verse in which Jesus himself now looks down from the sky while the child is the one sleeping—supposedly, unlike the baby Jesus, in a crib with all the trimmings.

J.T. McFarland has matched the approach of the original author in the creation of the third verse. His verse turns the carol into a

simple prayer, which furthers the thought that Jesus can be near us, not only while we sleep but throughout our lives and, indeed, through all eternity. However, in the final line of this verse, we are led to suspect that a further shift of scene has taken place and the children singing the carol are now the ones looking down from the sky—their heavenly home.

This is perhaps the Peter Pan of carols—no one in it ever seems to grow up—but perhaps this is part of its appeal. It transfers a warm, sentimental glow upon us, transporting us back to our own childhood, reminding us of our own early years and, if we have reached that stage in life, those of our children or our children's children.

UNPACKING THE MEANING OF THE CAROL

Despite its sentimental feel, this carol does contain deep theological truths, especially in the third verse. As well as being the first carol that some children learn, perhaps it would be appropriate for the first two lines of verse 3 to be the very first prayer that they are taught. 'Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay close by me for ever, and love me, I pray' could be turned into a simple bedtime prayer, learnt by heart and called to mind in the years ahead. In theological terms, this line picks up Jesus' promise that he will be with us always, 'even until the end of the world' (Matthew 28:20). In fact, the whole carol in some ways carries out Jesus' command in the following passage:

'I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth! Go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to do everything I have told you. I will be with you always, even until the end of the world.'

MATTHEW 28:18–20

If the words of the carol were originally written for Sunday school children, presumably they would have been within the context of biblical teaching. However, the words of this carol are well known even among those who have never attended Sunday school. Many people hear the Christmas message through this carol and are perhaps comforted by its familiarity. The original intention of the unknown author has found its place in making Jesus' promise known and fulfilling his command. How far that seed of truth has been scattered beyond the original Sunday school class!

The blessing at the end of the carol moves the child out of its immediate world to the world of those around, and draws in the story of salvation. Jesus is now not the baby laying down his sweet head but the king of heaven welcoming us into our heavenly home. Perhaps the whole story of salvation is rather a lot to draw from this simple carol but, bearing in mind the age of the original hearers and the era in which they lived, it is important to recognize that this is *implied* rather than *applied* theology. It sows the seed; the application can come later. The child learns to love Jesus, not because he or she understands the theology of salvation but because of Jesus' own love and care for the child. It is the first step in a lifetime of discovery about who Jesus is and what he has done for us and for our salvation.

In this respect, this is a 'belonging' carol, in which the steps towards 'believing' the gospel message have only just begun. Bearing this in mind, perhaps even those bright twinkling stars are not quite as sentimental as they seem, for within their imagery is the promise God first made to Abraham that he would have as many descendants as stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5). In the ancient scriptures of the Old Testament we see how from Abraham's first step of faith grew the nation of God's people. In the New Testament, we learn that those who believe the gospel message are descendants of that family and inheritors of the promise to Abraham, fulfilled in Jesus. Imbedded within the simple words of this carol is the sweep of God's great rescue plan from incarnation to ascension, from a

roughly hewn cattle trough to the throne of heaven. What lullaby of love could ask for more than that the child within should be blessed with the promise of eternity?

BIBLE LINKS

The simple words of this carol pick up many biblical themes. Its childlike quality calls to mind Peter's words in his first letter: 'Be like newborn babies who are thirsty for the pure spiritual milk that will help you grow and be saved' (1 Peter 2:2). Thus we see the invitation to build on small seeds of faith and continue on the journey. Peter shows us that from the simple seeds of a newborn faith grows a spiritual house—living stones built firmly on the cornerstone of Christ:

You have already found out how good the Lord really is. Come to Jesus Christ. He is the living stone that people have rejected, but which God has chosen and highly honoured. And now you are living stones that are being used to build a spiritual house. You are also a group of holy priests, and with the help of Jesus Christ you will offer sacrifices that please God.

1 PETER 2:3–5

As the carol closes, we find a prayer of blessing, drawing us into the arms of Jesus and the promise of his kingdom. As the prayer in verse 3 implies, we are fit for heaven only through the help of Jesus Christ; with his help, we are able to become holy priests, ready to further the kingdom of God. Also, within the carol and Peter's first letter, we find an echo of Psalm 34: 'Discover for yourself that the Lord is kind. Come to him for protection, and you will be glad... If you obey the Lord, he will watch over you and answer your prayers' (vv. 8, 15), and the promise of Jesus in John's Gospel that he has prepared a place for us to be with him for ever:

'Don't be worried! Have faith in God and have faith in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house... I am going there to prepare a place for each of you. After I have done this, I will come back and take you with me. Then we will be together.'

JOHN 14:1-3

As previously mentioned, the carol also links to the following passage:

Then the Lord took Abram outside and said, "Look at the sky and see if you can count the stars. That's how many descendants you will have." Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord was pleased with him.

GENESIS 15:5-6

Finally, we cannot leave our study of the way this carol links into the Bible without bringing to mind Jesus' own attitude to children.

Some people brought their children to Jesus so that he could bless them by placing his hands on them. But his disciples told the people to stop bothering him. When Jesus saw this, he became angry and said, 'Let the children come to me! Don't try to stop them. People who are like these little children belong to the kingdom of God. I promise you that you cannot get into God's kingdom, unless you accept it the way a child does.' Then Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them by placing his hands on them.

MARK 10:13-16