

Christmas

Carols : Away in a Manger

Foundation

Bible passage: Luke 2.4-12

Away In A Manger is one of the most popular Christmas carols. It first appeared, with just two verses, in various American magazines beginning in 1882. It soon became popular. The third verse first appeared a decade later.

The earliest known references to the carol say that it was written by the German Reformer Martin Luther, for his children. However, there is no other evidence for this and it may have been made up by the author, who is unknown, to give it prestige, or more possibly because the person who submitted it for publication had it confused with another carol that Luther wrote for his son Richard.

The popularity of the carol no doubt derives from its sentimental language and warm cosy feel which is in contrast to what must have been quite unsettling circumstances for Mary and Joseph as their baby had to be laid in a manger as there was no room at the inn (Luke 2.7).

The first verse of the carol does, however, remind us of the unusual events and the fact that the child was laid in a manger is mentioned by the angels in their announcement to the shepherds (Lk 2.12) and again by Luke in verse 16. Luke didn't want the point to be missed.

Docetism?

Some have suggested that the words “no crying he makes” imply that Jesus was not like other babies and so not fully human (the heresy of docetism). Quite why the carol describes the baby as not crying when awoken by lowing cattle is not clear, but unless babies always cry when woken by lowing cattle the charge of heresy is a bit over the top!

Earliest known publication of all three verses in Gabriel's Vineyard Songs (1892).

The second verse refers to stars looking down, which is a bit fanciful, but reminds us that the birth of this child has cosmic significance. As other writers have noted, the child in the manger is also the One through whom all things were made - even the stars.

“you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger”

The rest of verse 2 seems to see Jesus looking down like a star and this is turned into a bedtime prayer “stay by my side until morning is nigh”. One of the titles of Jesus in the Bible is “the Bright and Morning Star” (Rev 22.16).

Prayer continues into the third verse making various petitions in child friendly language but rooted in Biblical teaching. For example, Jesus promised to be with His disciples always, even to the end of the age, and the carol asks Him to be “close by me for ever”. By beginning at the manger and moving to prayer to Jesus we are reminded that the child in the manger, after death and resurrection, ascended and sits at the right hand of the Father.



Away in a Manger reminds us that the baby in the manger was much more than just a baby.

