

Christmas

Carols : While Shepherds Watched

Foundation

Bible passage: Luke 2.8-19

The events described in these Bible verses are also the subject of unit 16.

Nahum Teate was born in Dublin in 1652 a time of great turmoil in Ireland. He moved to London in 1676 and used the surname Tate and made a living from writing. In 1692 he was made Poet Laureate, appointed by the Government to write poems and songs for special occasions.

At this time only Psalms, canticles and certain hymns could be sung in the Church of England. Tate wrote his carol "Song of the Angels at the Nativity of our Blessed Saviour". It was first published in 1700 and until 1782 was the only carol officially permitted to be sung in churches. It became known by the opening words "While Shepherds Watched". In the UK and Commonwealth, the carol is now most often sung to the tune Winchester Old, but there are others including Jackson's Tune written by the organist at All Saints Oldham, Lancs, in 1903.

"Glory to God in the highest"

The carol retells what is described in Luke chapter 2 in some detail with a certain amount of poetic licence to make it work as poetry. It is probably the fact that it follows Scripture so closely that the carol was permitted to be sung in churches.

★ Verse 1 sets the scene with the Shepherds in the fields and the angel appearing with glory shining around (Lk 2.8-9).



Earliest printing (1700) in "A New version of the Psalms of David"

★ In verse 2 the angel addresses the understandable fear of the shepherds (fear is the normal response to angels in the Bible). The angels then announced the good news of great joy (Lk 2.9-10)

★ Verse 3 speaks of the fact that the child is born in David's town and of David's line. Three particular words are used, all full of meaning; Saviour, Christ and Lord. The angels speak of a sign to underline to the shepherds, and to us, what was happening (Lk 2.11).

★ Verse 4 records the fact that the sign is not in the first instance great and wonderful, but a baby simply (meanly means lowly or humble) wrapped and lying in a manger. (Lk 2.12)

★ Despite these humble circumstances in verses 5 and 6 we sing with the throng of angels about the true wonder of what has happened and so give glory to God. The child born in humility is truly Saviour, Christ and Lord, through whom people can find peace with God. In the carol we join with the angels in praising God for what has happened (Lk 2.13-14).



Not many people on earth noticed Jesus coming at first, but it was big news in heaven and a cause for rejoicing.