

Christmas

Carols : We Three Kings

Foundation

Bible passage: Matthew 2.1-12

In unit 17 we saw the carol “While Shepherds Watched” closely followed the account of events in the Bible, almost word for word in places. We Three Kings, written a century and a half later, relies much more on traditions, and the imagination of the author, than it does Bible.

John Henry Hopkins Jr. was a music teacher training future clergy for the Episcopal Church in the United States. He had already written several hymns when in about 1857 he put on a Christmas pageant for his nieces and nephews. Included in this was the carol “We Three Kings” although it wasn’t published until 1863. Hopkins later became a Bishop and spoke at the funeral of General Ulysses S Grant, the 18th President of the United States.

The Bible does not call the men kings, that comes from much later. Nor does it tell us that there were three men, that seems to have been assumed from the fact that they brought three gifts. It is possible that some of the later traditions are correct but the fact that Matthew’s account is so brief and that other details don’t seem to have surfaced very quickly make them uncertain at best. Amongst some old churches there were thought to have been twelve wise men, which would make the state at nativity plays much more crowded!

Matthew mentions the three gifts but makes no attempt to explain their meaning. Ever since

“they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh”

*The Adoration
of the Magi
by Bartolomé
Esteban
Murillo*



writers and preachers have sought to draw out the Biblical significance of each and the carol reflects this.

In the second verse it is the kingship of Jesus that is in view and gold is seen as a suitable gift for a king. Jesus’ reign is eternal and over all creation.

The third verse sees frankincense as a gift suitable for God as the offering of incense was a key part of the worship in the Tabernacle and Temple. This gift therefore speaks of the fact that Jesus is God, the Son of God.

Myrrh was used at burials and was indeed used to prepare Jesus body for burial (Jn 19.39). This verse therefore reminds us that Jesus came to lay down His life for others.

The significance of the three gifts is brought together in the final verse which speaks of the risen Lord, King (gold), God (frankincense) and sacrifice (myrrh) and the praises of heaven for what Christ has done. As with many other carols it doesn’t just speak about Jesus’ birth but his death, resurrection and heavenly reign.



The carol, though relying on traditions rather than the Bible, relates the gifts to the fact that Jesus is King, God and sacrifice.