

Christmas

“On Earth Peace, Good Will toward Men” – the announcement of the angels to the shepherds – is the main message of Christmas.¹ Its meaning persists even without the attendant theology.

Winter is a time for rest. Midwinter celebrations such as Christmas are marked by both conviviality and quietness. In the cold it is better to gather together than to fight each other. And nothing takes the mind away from the present more than starry night over snowy ground.

This post presents some visual and musical versions of the Christmas message. Christmas music usually makes reference to the birth of a savior and wishes everyone be merry. The following music is from the Christmas Concerto (1712) by Arcangelo Corelli, played by the McGill University Sinfonietta under Marcel Saint-Cyr. The allegro celebrates the joyfulness of Christmas and the final adagio portrays its peacefulness.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Corelli-Christmas-Concerto-5.mp3>

Near the town of Ipswich, where I lived as a child, is the smaller town of Bury St Edmunds, named after Edmund, King of the Angles, who died in 869 defending the land from Viking invaders. He was buried at the abbey of Beodercisworth, founded in the seventh century. As the shrine attracted pilgrims, the town and abbey flourished and renamed themselves after the martyred king. The following photograph shows the ruins of the abbey that was rebuilt in the eleventh century, and the steeple of the cathedral built in the fifteenth century.



In the middle of the nineteenth century, Thomas Carlyle visited Bury St Edmunds and was impressed by its history. His world was following goals quite different from those that had governed the abbey. Man was exploiting others for gain, rather than working together for the common good. The world had forgotten its compassion:

But yet it is pity we had lost tidings of our souls: actually we shall have to go in quest of them again, or worse in all ways will befall! A certain degree of soul, as Ben Jonson reminds us, is indispensable to keep the very body from destruction of the frightfullest sort; to 'save us,' says he, 'the expense of salt.' Ben has known men who had soul enough to keep their body and five senses from becoming carrion, and save salt: men, and also Nations. You may look in Manchester Hunger-mobs and Cornlaw Commons Houses, and various other quarters, and say whether either soul or else salt is not somewhat wanted at present! ²

Soul has lost its primacy for understanding ourselves. Yet the concept remains helpful even when freed from its religious underpinnings: that which in us looks to matters beyond the present and that which leads us to help rather than hate our fellows. Carlyle and his world are long gone, but we are still

in need of soul.

The following music is *England's Carol* – God rest ye, merry gentlemen – as performed by the Modern Jazz Quartet accompanied by a symphony orchestra (1960).³ Tidings of comfort and joy in soulful variations:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/03-Englands-Carol-German-Symphony.mp3>

The following photograph shows the ruins of the abbey in Bury St Edmunds in a more abstract manner:



Once we had a soul. We may not now need its theological trappings. But we must regain its compassion and desire for peace.

The posting ends with Percy Grainger's setting of the *Sussex Mummers' Carol* for viola (Paul Coletti) and piano (Leslie Howard). The viola is the most harmonious of the strings, bringing together the brightness of the violins and the intensity of the cello. Grainger's music comes in many different versions. The message is the same:

God bless your house, your children too,

Your cattle and your store;
The Lord increase you day by day,
And give you more and more.
And give you more and more ⁴

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/grain-ger-sussex-mummers-carol-coletti-and-howard.mp3>

Happy Christmas! I wish everyone peace on earth and good will toward men. You need not believe in the angels to accept their tidings of our souls.

Notes

¹ The angels' words are quoted from Luke 2:14 in the King James Version. More recent translations have followed early manuscripts, which have *eudokia* (goodwill, benevolence, pleasure) in the genitive form (*eudokias*). The message then makes the peace contingent on human goodwill "Peace on earth to men of goodwill"

² Carlyle, T. (1843, reprinted 1897). *Past and present*. London: Ward, Lock & Bowden. (Book II, Chapter 2, *St. Edmundsbury*). Shelston (*Thomas Carlyle Selected Writings*, Penguin, 1971) notes that the reference is to Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* I:6:88-90 when Wittipol refers to Mistress Fitzdottrel as

the wife

To so much blasted flesh as scarce has soul
Instead of salt to keep it sweet.

A long tradition has claimed that saints were so full of soul that their bodies did not decompose after death. The unsaintly had to resort to salt to preserve their corpses.

³ John Lewis, piano; Milt Jackson, vibraphone; Percy Heath,

bass; Connie Kay, drums. The orchestra is conducted by Gunther Schuller

⁴ Full lyrics