

John 1:1-18**Rest ye merry**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Christmas carol that we just sang, 'God rest ye merry gentlemen', is one of the oldest on record. Certainly, there were Christian hymns that spoke of the incarnation, but this was amongst the first joyous celebrations of the nativity story. It still shows many traces of its 15th-century English origins, as the language doesn't quite fit our modern usage. This actually leads to a possible bit of misunderstanding, especially in the first line.

'God rest ye merry gentlemen' sounds like being told to have a much-needed afternoon nap after a big Christmas lunch, but it's actually nothing of the sort. The phrase 'rest ye merry' means something along the lines of 'keep you joyful', and the merry is definitely not describing the state of the gentlemen. This is a prayer that God would grant his people joy, and not let anything bring dismay as they celebrate the birth of their saviour.

We get that in the readings of the nativity story. The angels bring good news of great joy to the shepherds. When Simeon met the child in the temple, he rejoiced in having seen God's salvation. When the Magi followed the star to the house where the child was, they 'rejoiced exceedingly with great joy'. Even in John's gospel, which we read today, the good news of the incarnation shines through, even though John doesn't give us a typical nativity story.

What we do get in John is a lofty description of the divinity of Jesus. While Luke and Matthew emphasise his humanity, John is all about the eternal Word of God now dwelling in human flesh. The divine light now shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not and can not overcome it. The prophet Isaiah spoke of a people who walked in darkness. They lived in a land of deep darkness, but now light has shined. This light is none other than the eternal God now dwelling in human flesh.

Our God choosing to be incarnate, to take on our humanity, our flesh, and to walk among us is one of the pivotal points in salvation history. God had redeemed his people Israel from bondage in Egypt, and led them with the pillar of cloud and fire, but this was just a foretaste of the redemption that was to come. God instructed them to build a tent, a tabernacle, where the glory of his presence would reside as they travelled to the promised land. But now the Word has become flesh. This Word that was with God in the beginning, a partner in creation, and indeed was God, has now made his dwelling among his creation.

He has tabernacled among us, or to put it a bit more loosely, God has moved into the neighbourhood. So the fullness of divinity is now present in this one human. And this point of Jesus being fully human and fully divine has caused strife and contention, and continues to baffle some in the faith today. But it is so very important. For the gospel writer John, it was the first thing worth talking about. And in chapter three he tells us the purpose, the reason. God loved the world so much that God came to dwell among us, teach us, and die for us, that whoever believes shall have eternal life.

But there is already rejection in John chapter one. God was in the world, but the world did not recognise him. God came to his own people, but they did not receive him. God created all things, but the world did not recognise or know or welcome the very one to whom it owes its existence. John really gets straight to the point. While the other gospels give us a chance to marvel at the events of that first Christmas, John is already speaking of rejection. Even with the Baptist preparing the way and testifying to the light, people still did not accept him with joy.

But Jesus still did all that he came to do. The faithfulness and commitment of God is on display here. This wonderful text that opens John's gospel tells us of a God who has promised to shine light into the darkness, a God who has promised to bring grace and truth, a God who loves his creation and willingly enters into it to save it.

The incarnation, the dwelling of God in human flesh is the full expression of God's love and desire to be with his people. He promised that to Israel, and they knew of his presence only by the glory cloud. But now the incarnate Jesus brings to us the glory of the one and only Son, full of grace and truth.

Words cannot fully express the greatness of the joy this gives. John's lofty words come close. So do Paul's words to the Ephesian church:

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. (Ephesians 1:3-4, NLT)

Our words cannot really do justice to the significance of the incarnation, of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. Neither can all the Christmas carols we sing, though some might raise you higher than others. But the good news is we have all eternity to get it right. God's great act of love in coming down to us deserves an eternity of praise, and that is what he will get.

So as our Christmas celebrations finally wind up for another year, may the joy that God gives find its way deep in your heart. May you rejoice every day in the God who dwells among his people. May God 'rest ye merry', meaning, 'keep you joyful', always recognising who he is and what he has done for you. And may we celebrate the Messiah's birth every day, ever praising our God and Saviour, the Word who became flesh. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.