

This Christmas poem, written by Henry W. Longfellow, will serve as a guide to our Christmas Sunday meditation. I think the words contain a profound Christmas truth, and a challenging message for us today. We might state the central thought of the song and our sermon this way: "Despite the halting progress of good in our world, the Christ of Christmas is always working among us to bring about his will and purpose". The poem itself refers specifically to peace, but the truth it lifts up is broader than that.

The first stanza:

I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

These words recall everything that has become familiar to you and me about Christmas. Specifically mentioned here are carols and music. Who of us doesn't enjoy this season because of the rich heritage of Christmas music? For many of us it is a time of nostalgia - going back to childhood days, filling our minds with memories of past Christmases.

Christmas today is tinged with the jet age, its true. The smooth plastics and metals that make up many of our presents are reminders of the technological age. Rampant materialism and commercialization is part of Christmas today. Perhaps this is part of the reason we like to turn to the

familiar things around Christmas. We enjoy the tree, the family dinner, ornaments which have been with us a long time, the biblical story. Christmas is full of traditional and familiar things. As the first stanza suggests, "I heard the bells on Christmas day, their old familiar carols play"

But not in the second stanza:

I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had roll'd along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

The writer is pondering on the meaning of these wonderful traditions. He thinks to himself: "We have repeated all these familiar actions of the season once again. We have rung the Christmas bells, we have lighted the Christmas candles. All over the world the songs of Christmas are being sung. But where has it gotten us? Has anything really happened in the world because we have kept Christmas? Today the choirs sing 'peace on earth, goodwill to men' but what meaning has there been to these familiar words".

I hope we are doing something about the meaning of Christmas. That's is part of the reason for any celebration - to ponder on the reason for the festival, to get clear in our minds just what we are celebrating. Christmas is a good time to think about the meaning, let us make it a day of reflection as well as a day of merriment. Let us be like Mary who "pondered all these things in her heart".

As we ponder, tho, we might be filled with despair.

And in despair I bow'd my head:
'there is no peace on earth' I said,
for hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

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The poet thinks about the unbroken peal of Christmas bells down thru the ages. But who has listened to the bells? Where is the peace? Where is the good will among men? Can't we identify with the poet's feelings? There is ample room for despair today. Despite Christmas all these years there is violence, there is war often sponsored and promoted by 'Christian' nations. Even amid the peace and freedom of our land, there is no peace. Every sector of society is turbulent, there are serious estrangements among peoples. The lack of peace surrounds the very altar of Christ's church. So radical has been the despair of some that they have given up on God. Who needs him amid the crushing world? Why is he so slow in acting for us?

Why are we so slow to act for him?

Well, the poet gives answer in the next stanza

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep
God is not dead nor doth he sleep
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men.

Here is the essential message of Christmas. God is moving in the world. He does act for the sake of his people. It may not always look that way, nor sound that way. But the Lord's light never goes out, his bell does not cease to ring.

When
~~When~~

Jesus was born on Christmas night in a manger, there

seemed little reason for rejoicing and hope. Another child born in the world, who would notice? He is the son of peasants, and the circumstances of his birth are about the (4) lowest imaginable. How much power for good and change could possibly be exercised by one who stole his way into the world at midnight and in a barn?

But Lord Chesterton was right when he commented about the meaning of Christmas "The Day of things that cannot be and are". Amid the seeming silence and absence of God in the world, he comes and makes his way among us. Listen! Above the dinginess and clamor of the world's noise the bells of Christmas are still heard. They are ringing. The voice of the Lord is heard. The Word of the Lord becomes flesh and dwells among us. On the cross he shall valiantly fight against the lower powers of this world. Evil will be defeated. God is working, God will be victorious. In fact, that is the faith of the Christian: God has already won the victory. That is the good news.

You and I can look out on our world this Christmas with new eyes, with eyes of faith, with eyes of hope. Despite the halting progress of good in our world, the Christ of Christmas is always working among us to bring peace and good will. After our prayer, let us unite in singing this beautiful carol.....~~while especially noting the final stanza.~~
stanza.