

“What Child is This?”

Isaiah 11:1; Song of Solomon 2:1

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • December 17, 2017 (KSYC)

Today is the third Sunday of the Advent season. This season, the month of December, I’m preaching on the beautiful songs of Christmas, and how they refer to the Bible. In the last two Sundays, I spoke about the hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” and “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming.” Today, I chose the beautiful Christmas hymn, “What Child is This?”

“What Child is This?” is one of the more Biblical modern Christmas hymns. It came from a longer Christmas poem, “The Manger Throne,” written by William C. Dix, an English lay hymnwriter about 1865. The melody “Greensleeves” is a traditional English folk tune.

The first stanza is made up of rhetorical questions about the newborn Jesus. The second stanza has a rhetorical question in the first two lines, answered by the next two lines. The third stanza is a plea to all to receive him as Prophet, Priest and King. The chorus affirms that the Son of Mary is also the King.

The first stanza says,

What Child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary’s lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?

In Luke 2:11, we read of the angel’s announcement to the shepherds in the field, *“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”* (Luke 2:11). This Child is no ordinary Child, since he was the Son of God who was born to save his people from their sins. But he is also an ordinary Child, because he was also born as a true human being, who needed to sleep and to nurse from his mother Mary.

After the announcement, a multitude of heavenly angels sang, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”* (Luke 2:14) After the angels left, we read what the shepherds did, *“And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger”* (Luke 2:16).

This Child is the Eternal King

The chorus of the hymn affirms that this Child born in Bethlehem would be the Eternal King:

This, this is Christ, the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary!

Isaiah prophesied that a Child will be born, *“And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace”* (Isaiah 9:6). So the three wise men from

the east asked Herod, *“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him”* (Matt 2:2). And when this Child returns from heaven, *“On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords* (Rev 19:16).

This Child is the Better Prophet

In the second stanza, we sing:

Why lies He in such mean estate,
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.

This stanza teaches that this Child Jesus is the Superior Prophet, who proclaims God’s Word, because he is God himself. He is a better Prophet than Moses, the greatest prophet of Israel.

Luke 2:12 says that Jesus was laid in a manger, which was a feeding trough for animals. In John 1:1, we read that Christ was in the beginning was the Word of God, and he was God himself. Jesus told his disciples in John 5:24, *“whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.”* Peter knew this after being with Jesus and hearing his words, when he said in John 6:68-69, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”*

This Child is the Great High Priest

The third stanza affirms that this Child is our Great High Priest:

So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,
Come, peasant, king to own Him.
The King of kings salvation brings;
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.

In the Old Testament, when priests offered food offerings, they also burned frankincense, which was a *“pleasing aroma to the LORD”* (Lev 2:2). When the wise men from the east arrived at the house where Jesus was born, they *“offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh”* (Matt 2:11). And after he was crucified on the cross, his body was anointed with *“a mixture of myrrh and aloes”* (John 19:39). The apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5:2 that Christ so loved his people that he offered himself as a sacrifice for their sins. This was *“a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*

When Jesus entered Jerusalem the last time before he was crucified, the Jews met him with joy spreading palm branches on his way, proclaiming, *“‘Hosanna [O save us]! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!’* (John 12:13) So in Acts 4:12, Peter proclaimed, *“there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”*

However, the third stanza can be improved. “Come, peasant, king to own him” can be reworded as “Come, peasant, king, *and worship Him.*” Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords, therefore, he is to be worshiped. Shepherds and peasants, slaves and free, men and women, rich and poor, Jews and

non-Jews like the three wise men, all worship him (Matt 2:11). In Philippians 2:9–11, Paul says that God gave him *“the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”* And can anyone “own him”? No, because he is the one who owns the whole universe, for he is the Creator. In Psalm 2:8, God says to his Son, *“Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.”* The nations of the earth are his own possession.

“Let loving hearts *enthron* him” can also be revised to “Let loving hearts *receive* him.” Again, no creature can “enthron” him because he is King even if the world does not recognize him as King. God alone enthrones him, as the LORD says in Psalm 2:6, *“As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”*