

## When does Christmas begin for you?



Neil Richardson asks the question, "At what point does it feel like Christmas for you?" Is there something which suddenly strikes a chord and makes you say: Hmm. Now, it really does feel like Christmas?

For some people it feels like Christmas when they go to the staff party and put on the silly hat. For others, it is when the carol singers can be heard in the street. It might be the snow falling on the hillside? For some people, it feels Christmas has begun when they come to the Midnight Mass at Holy Cross Church.

For me, one of the defining moments of Christmas is the carol **In dulci jubilo**. Its different for everyone, I know, but for me, it feels like Christmas when I hear the distinctive, bell-like quality of the music and the free manner in which the Latin and English texts mingle and flow into each other.



Henry Suso, 15th century woodcut

It is a strangely beautiful carol, German in origin, from the 14th century and first translated into English around about 1540 and since then, it has been translated many times. By legend, the words were first sung by angels to the German mystic Henry Suso (pictured) in 1366. He was then drawn by the music to dance with his celestial visitors!

What a sight for sore eyes that would have been! And what a lovely little story for a carol.

It is what is called a macaronic carol - a carol in which the Latin language mixes freely with the vernacular. The word *macaronic* derives from an Italian dialect *maccarone* suggesting coarse peasant food. In history of music terms, it represents the meeting point for the stiff and distant Latin of Church worship and the more relaxed language and music of the people. Not surprisingly, Martin Luther the great reformer had a lot to do with this development, and it is thought that he even wrote the 3rd stanza of *In dulci jubilo*.

I suppose you could say that Macaronic verses are the start of a process which leads eventually to Jesus Christ Superstar, Graham Kendrick and modern church music!

Let me try and explain why *In dulci jubilo* has such a grip of my imagination at Christmastide. By the way, the words of the Carol were translated into English by R.L. Pearsall (1795-1856)

At its heart this carol has an extended persuasive longing, a beguiling, yearning desire for us to be somewhere else – a place which is described by the word "there"! It is in the court of the king, in heaven, where angels are always singing new songs and bells are ringing, and where true joys are to be found.

As the carol says, O, that we were there!

Let me just take you through the words and explain the Latin bits:

In dulci jubilo Let us our homage show Our heart's joy reclineth, In praesepio and like a bright star shineth Matris in gremio Alpha es et O.	<b>In sweet jubilation</b>  <b>in a manger</b>  <b>in his mother's lap</b> <b>who is the beginning and the end.</b>
O Jesu parvule! My heart is sore for thee. Hear me I beseech me O puer optime My prayer let it reach thee O princeps gloriae Trahe me post te	<b>O tiny Jesus</b>  <b>O best of boys.</b>  <b>O prince of glory</b> <b>Draw me after thee</b>
O Patris caritas O Nati lenitas Deeply were we stained per nostra crimina But thou for us has gained Coelorum gaudia. O that we were there.	<b>O love of the Father</b> <b>O gentleness of the Son</b>  <b>Through our crimes</b>  <b>The joys of heaven</b>
Ubi sunt gaudia If that they be not there? There are angels singing, Nova cantica. There the bells are ringing In Regis curia. O that we were there.	<b>Where is joy to be found?</b>  <b>New songs</b>  <b>In the court of the King</b>

Well, you may be thinking, isn't that a bit old-fashioned nowadays?

Pie in the sky when you die!

What about *here*, never mind *there*.

Indeed, we would be foolish people if we understood the carol to be an invitation to forget here and now; to wash our hands of today's problems and seek relief in heaven. Such a desire for heaven can lead to mass opting out of responsibility, for example, through suicide if you can remember what happened at the arrival of the beautiful Hale-Bopp comet in 1997? The passage of Hale-Bopp was notable also for inciting a degree of comet-related panic not seen for decades. Rumours that an alien spacecraft was following the comet gained remarkable currency, and inspired a mass suicide among followers of the Heaven's Gate cult.



Hale-Bopp Comet

No, our desire to be *there* does not have to be for us a negative comment on *here*.

- Here we are and here we are meant to be for the duration of our God given lives.
- Here is our home, gifted to us through the creative love of our Maker. Here we have a chance to use the powers and skills invested in us by God.
- Here we are called by God to make the earth fruitful and to share the fruits with our neighbours.
- Here we may seek and find the joy and love which fulfils our human needs.
- Here, we have the opportunity to create things of beauty and things of usefulness.
- Here we may accept the vocation to make things work in harmony, so that human care and education nurtures whole people.
- Here we may take the risks which our earth-born limitations make dangerous, such as climbing mountains, building bridges and eventually travelling through space.
- Here we may enjoy the thrill of being explorers, continuing the thorough exploration of our external habitat, and just as important, exploration of our human internal world.

Undoubtedly, for the Christian, here is a good place to be.

And yet, no matter how much we enjoy here, we all know, even small children know, that we are not here for ever, or even for very long. No, in spite of feeling very much at home here, the certain knowledge of our finitude means that we also have within us a profound and indelible sense that there is another place, another country, another reality, another way when we will continue to be our true selves, even when the earth has reclaimed our bodies.

We are quite right to accept the validity of these feelings. It would perhaps be immodest of us to claim with certainty that this life is all there is. We know what we feel deep down, and whilst we may be apprehensive of over-descriptive language, we cannot deny the reality and power of our longing to be **there**, and to share the joys which being **there** will bring. The joys which we hope for **there** inspire us and give optimism for our life here.

The amazing and pleasurable truth is that as Christian people, we may find ourselves touching and handling the stuff of heaven in our daily lives.

We touch heaven in our human love, as we give ourselves to each other, at various levels of profundity, but it is always within our reach to do so.

We touch heaven in our worship of God as we meet together to share the Peace of Christ and then taste the bread and wine made flesh and blood.

We touch heaven in the great harmony of music when our inner selves are re-aligned and set on course for a mystical harmony with God.

We touch heaven when we hear words of beauty which provoke second thoughts, a different approach, a new vision.

We touch heaven when, finding solitude, we also find ourselves alive to God.

As Christians, we have the great privilege and pleasure of anticipating the joys of heaven, the joys of *there*, whilst still experiencing the joys of *here and now*. That is why Christmas is so thrilling. That is why the news of the angels is so heart-warming. That is why our human lives can be so satisfying.

Ubi sunt gaudia? Where is joy to be found?

Here and there, Deo gracias.

O that we were there.

Neil Richardson