



The Hands That First Held Mary's Child

Our hymns of worship frequently employ language of the sublime and transcendent, words that reflect the abstract nature of our faith and belief in God. This hymn text, however, focuses on the physical, concrete reality of Jesus' first moments on earth, as a baby in the arms of his father. The earthy terminology of this picture, set in a gentle English folk melody, allows us to consider the humanity of Christ.

A first-time father cradles his newborn son. His large work-worn hands, rough and calloused from hard labor, gently engulf the thin, translucent fingers of the infant. Accustomed to lifting boards and supplies, driving nails into planks of wood, the father's strength ripples through his arms. Yet he lovingly embraces the small figure held in his arms. Look at those tiny feet; count each of the toes. In wonder, gaze into the eyes of this new child. Jesus.

Perhaps Joseph, when rocking his son to sleep, pondered the words spoken by the angel months before: "[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21, NIV). What did it mean? Who is this child? he may have wondered. As Joseph held the infant in his arms, perhaps the sense of joy and wonder of fatherhood mingled with thoughts of curiosity and awe: "My son will save our people..."

As the ancient prophets foretold, this Christ-Child, this Son of God, differed from every other god or deity created by humanity. This One True God would not rule as a standoffish divine being, viewing the affairs of people from a distance. This God would dwell among people, living with them, walking with them. His very name signifies his presence with his people: God with us. The infant held in the hands of Mary and Joseph was the incarnate God.

The irony of Christ's life on earth is realized in the fact that many citizens, who probably welcomed the newborn son into their community, would later raise their hands in protest and anger. They embraced what they saw and understood—an infant boy—yet rejected and rebelled against what they did not understand—Jesus the Messiah, who did not conform to their expectations or beliefs.

As we sing this Christmas hymn, celebrating the significance of the birth of Christ, let us also embrace the responsibilities that come with acknowledging Jesus' life on earth, his birth, death and resurrection. For in worshiping the Baby Jesus, we submit ourselves to following him as our Lord. Our God. Immanuel, God with us.