

O Little Town of Bethlehem



The voice of the hymn writer appears, at first hearing, to address a seemingly insignificant village in Judea. God does, at times, prefer the most unlikely places to do the even more unlikely things. Rather than any attempt to hide such events, God continually proves that his ways are conspicuously dissimilar to the ways of the world. Human wisdom might dictate that the coming of the LORD God in the form of a human baby would be worthy of a grand venue just up the road in Jerusalem. (But then human wisdom would probably never concoct such an absurd scheme anyway.)

We might consider this speaking to a minor burg in the hills a matter of geography, or local political identity, or even the physical set up of the place—streets and alleys, houses and shops, etc. A closer examination, however, will allow us to hear the first three stanzas as a message for the people of Bethlehem—not just the place. For there, in the midst of parents, children, extended families, friends, and neighbors the coming of Messiah fulfilled the desires and anticipation produced by a long-ago prophecy.

Of course Phillips Brooks is writing metaphorically to people who would never read or hear his words. Yet his retrospective reflections are actually intended for the audience of his own life-time, and ultimately for generations that followed.

The first stanza proclaims the event clearly, giving a sense of time and place that reminds us that Jesus Christ stepped into the historical reality of human life. The second and third stanzas (still in a voice of address to the people) seek to explain the meaning of the event—the significance of which is eternally relevant. The fourth stanza is a prayer of humble and trusting response to the glorious news. The foundation is laid for the absolutely essential Christology of what we have come to know as Christmas.

This is truly a hymn for all eras—including our own. In a sense we all live in Bethlehem—seemingly insignificant places where God does the improbable. For the message of the incarnation of God in Christ is timeless as well as timely for every age. And Christ is born again into the world through us as a constant reminder that God has chosen to manifest the greatest redemption possible to accomplish that which human wisdom would likely deem impossible.

© 2012 Rob Hewell