

Christmas Day

How many syllables are in the Latin word “Gloria”? Well, if you’re singing a certain Christmas carol, the answer is 18. A contest you can try at home and here in church again in a few minutes is to see who can sing the first phrase in the refrain of “Angels we have heard on high” all in one breath.

Christmas brings some of the most beautiful music of the year, gathered from around the world. Christmas encourages people to sing even at home, which in our culture we don’t often do. At other times of year, you rarely hear the singing of choirs when you turn on a radio, walk into a place of business, or stream from the internet. But at Christmas, the music people love the most is carols you can sing, even in different languages, made even more beautiful by voices of different registers blending in peaceful harmony. The very singing of a choir underscores one important attribute of Christmas: It unites us in love for one another and for God, who cared so much for this world that he gave us his only Son. Because of Christ, who came to save us, we have more in common with one another than we have differences. Singing Christmas carols in harmony shows the world the power and beauty of what we believe.

Today’s responsorial lists its own reasons why we simply have to sing. It celebrates a victory, probably in battle, and it ascribes the conquest not to any earthly ruler, but to God, who responded favorably to the people’s prayer. The first verse goes, “the Lord... has done wondrous deeds; his right hand has won victory for him, his holy arm.” This must come as sad news to some of you, but apparently God is right-handed. Or, you could argue, God is left-handed, and even with his right hand, he was still able to win the victory because his entire arm is holy.

This victory put God in charge, and God will be a better ruler than the ones the people have known. The psalm continues, “in the sight of the nations he has revealed his justice. He has remembered his kindness and faithfulness to the house of Israel.” These verses reveal a God who is both powerful and loving, one who can set things in order, and in an order that makes kindness the law that governs the land. In our own lives, yes, we often let kindness govern our actions, but not always. We sometimes act out of pride, jealousy and spite. God’s rule will be more effective the more we contribute to the spread of kindness.

For these reasons, Psalm 98 promotes music. “Sing to the Lord a new song,” it begins, and not just with voices. If you play an instrument, pick it up and join in. The psalm concludes, “Sing praise to the Lord with the harp, ...with trumpets and the sound of the horn, sing joyfully before the king.”

Christmas carols contain deep theology: “Christ the Lord” is “God of God, Light of Light.... Our very God, begotten, not created.” “All is bright Round yon virgin mother and child.” “Love’s pure light Radiant beams from [the] holy face” of the “Son of God,” “With the dawn of redeeming grace.” These carols teach us what to believe about Christmas. They help us tell others what we believe. They put onto our lips the songs of praise we owe to God. He wins every battle we entrust to his holy arm. We join the rest of the world in one harmonious chorus of praise for the wonders that God has done every time we use our breath to sing.

Sunday, December 25, 2022