

Christmastide

“Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #384)

Although many of our most popular Christmas carols are only a few hundred years old, the Christmas carol “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” takes us back a few *thousand* years, almost to the birth of Christ. The text was written by Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348-c.413), a Roman official from Spain who after a trip to Rome dedicated his life to writing Christian poetry using the classical forms, meter, and devices of Latin poetry. It is taken from *Hymnus omnis horae* (“Hymn for All Seasons”), a thirty-eight stanza poem published in 405 AD as a part of *Liber Cathemerinon*, a book of twelve lyric poems for practicing Christians. The ninth poem of this collection, *Hymnus omnis horae*, celebrates the life of Christ from His birth to His ascension and in so doing outlines the first half of Church Year. Joy leaps off the page in the first stanza as Prudentius exhorts the faithful to praise their Savior with both voice and instruments:

Servant, bring me a pick, so that I may
make music for dances of the faithful,
a delightful poem and melody
that bears the standard of Christ.
To Him alone shall I sing this song,
praising Him upon the lyre.

A literal translation of the first nine stanzas of the Prudentius poem can be found below.

In the mid-1800s, John Mason Neale (1818-66) translated several of this poem’s Christmas stanzas into English and Thomas Helmore (1811-90) paired the resulting text with the tune DIVINUM MYSTERIUM (“Divine Mystery”). This tune was originally a Sanctus trope that would of course have been sung during the celebration of Holy Communion.

Combining this Christmas text with a tune connected with the celebration of Holy Communion makes a profound theological statement. For Christians, the incarnation—God becoming man—is at the heart of the joy and mystery of Christmas. For us as Lutheran Christians, incarnation is also at the heart of the Sacrament of Holy Communion: God coming to His people in a very real way through His true body and true blood in, with, and under the forms of bread and wine. Thus, every time we sing this carol we proclaim the “divine mystery” of both incarnations and that God did not come to earth and then abandon us, but rather is still active, living and dwelling among us.

Whenever we sing this carol, let us remember that Jesus, the God incarnate, came to us not only at Christmas, but also comes to us whenever we partake of the Lord’s Supper. His incarnation and the salvation that was accomplished through it did not end with His ascension into heaven, but rather is to be proclaimed throughout the world until He comes again. He will on that day return on the clouds in all glory (Matthew 24:30) taking the faithful to live with Him eternally (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). Until that day, may our God continue to make Himself known to us and dwell “incarnate” in both our hearts and minds “evermore and evermore.”

Amen! E'en so Lord Jesus, quickly come (Revelation 22:20).

Martin Dicke
Peoria, Illinois



A Literal Translation of the First Nine Stanzas of Hymnus omnis horae

1. Servant, bring me a pick, so that I may
make music for dances of the faithful,
a delightful poem and melody
that bears the standard of Christ.
To Him alone shall I sing this song,
praising Him upon the lyre.
2. It is of the coming of Christ
that King David, adorned with the diadem,
continuously prophecied
with voice, string, and tambourine,
eagerly drinking deep into his bones
the Spirit that flowed from heaven.
3. Now we sing as well of the miracles,
attested and recorded.
The world bears witness, nor does
the earth, who saw it, deny it:
God dwelling among mortals to teach them,
making Himself known to them.
4. Begotten of the Father
before the world began,
He is Alpha and Omega,
the beginning (source) and the end;
all that is, was,
everything that is yet to be.
5. He gave the word and they were created,
spoke and they were made:
the earth, the heavens, the depths of the ocean,
a skillfully devised threefold system;
all that flourishes here under the
globe of the sun and the moon.
6. He put on a perishable body,
limbs subject to death,
so that those born from the seed

of the first man might not perish;
those that the condemnation of the Law
had plunged into the depths of hell.

7. O that blessed birth
when a virgin bore a child
conceived by the Holy Spirit
to bring about our salvation;
and the boy, Redeemer of the world,
revealed His sacred face!

8. Sing with the lyre heights of heaven,
play and sing all you angels!
Let the virtuous everywhere
sing praise to God!
Let no tongue be silent,
every voice resound!

9. Behold, this is He who the ancient seers
sang of long ago;
who the trustworthy scrolls of the prophets
solemnly promised.
Now He springs forth, promised of old.
Let all things praise Him together!

Text: Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348-c. 413)

The first nine verses of *Hymnus omnis horae* (*Hymn for All Hours*) from *Liber Cathemerinon*, (405).

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