



November 2022

Dear listener,

One of the best-known Christmas hymns is undoubtedly “Joy to the World.” Its opening eight notes — a simple descending scale in the tune known as ANTIOCH — are a sure signal of certain festivity. But the facts *behind* the celebration heralded in Isaac Watts’s hymn are not readily acknowledged by many who enthusiastically sing it.

The text was first published in 1719 in Watts’s *Psalms of David imitated in the language of the New Testament*. That volume included a Christocentric reworking of Psalm 98 titled, “To our Almighty Maker, God.” The original psalm begins “O sing unto the Lord a new song, for he hath done marvelous things” (KJV). The Psalmist then tells us that the Lord has “revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations” (ESV). Expressions of joy are repeatedly referenced; all the earth — its people and the sea and the hills — responds with joy at the coming of the righteous King of Creation to “judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.”

“Joy to the World” is not a carol about the events surrounding the Nativity of our Lord, though it is about the *significance* of that humble birth. Watts’s text was never intended to be reserved for use only during Christmastide. Every day is a day on which we should announce: “Let earth receive her King!” He is not merely the King of the Jews, the Lord of Christians, or a sentimental symbol of generic good will. At the moment of his Ascension, Jesus declared what angels and shepherds and Magi had anticipated decades earlier — that all authority in Heaven and on Earth is rightfully his. So, Watts’s hymn declares, Heaven and Nature properly, fittingly, rightfully *sing*. The affirmation of Christ’s *rule* over all things is the occasion for all things — fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains, as well as all the peoples of the earth — to respond with unprecedented joy and adoration.

The third stanza of this hymn is sometimes omitted in hymnals and public performances since it refers to the Curse with its attendant sins, sorrows, and thorns. But “cancelling” references to sin’s *enslaving enmity* toward all Creation eliminates recognition of the *liberating victory* Christ has accomplished for us. Without the *fact* of that victory, our joy is arbitrary and fragile.

Apparently many who find offensive the claims about the Curse and our redemption are nonetheless willing to sing the final stanza: “He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love.” Our age’s celebration of autonomous individuals would seem to conflict with delight at *anyone’s* rule and with the assumption that a single and universal standard of truth would be welcome. And the possibility that righteousness would be discovered to be glorious is also more than a bit out of synch with the *Zeitgeist*.

The spirit of “Joy to the World” and of the psalm that inspired it (indeed, of all the psalms) is fundamentally the spirit of *worship*. The joyful noise enjoined in Psalm 98 is a communal and global expression of *submissive praise*, which is the appropriate response of creatures.

The hymnody of the Church has, in its best expressions, echoed the inspired psalms and canticles of Scripture in affirming the belief that *the posture of humble and grateful praise is the fulfillment of our humanity, the recognition of the meaning of our creatureliness.*

Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann believed that the spirit of modern secularism was an obstacle to the posture of worship. In its radical separation of the “natural” from the “supernatural,” the essence of secularism, he wrote, is “the affirmation of the world’s autonomy,” that is, that human reason and human action can proceed apart from the spirit of worship. “When we see the world as an end in itself,” observed Schmemmann, “everything becomes itself a value and consequently loses all value, because only in God is found the meaning (value) of everything, and the world is meaningful only when it is the ‘sacrament’ of God’s presence.” Worship is the posture most fitting for our nature and for the nature of what the world is: an expression of God’s love and an invitation for communion with him.

In *For the Life of the World*, Schmemmann wrote:

Secularism, I submit, is above all a negation of worship. I stress: — not of God’s existence, not of some kind of transcendence and therefore of some kind of religion. If secularism in theological terms is a heresy, it is primarily a heresy about man. It is the negation of man as a worshipping being, as *homo adorans*: the one for whom worship is the essential act which both ‘posits’ his humanity and fulfills it. It is the rejection as ontologically and epistemologically ‘decisive,’ of the words which ‘always, everywhere and for all’ were the true ‘epiphany’ of man’s relation to God, to the world and to himself: ‘It is meet and right to sing of Thee, to bless Thee, to praise Thee, to give thanks to Thee, to worship Thee in every place of Thy dominion. . . .’

A few years ago, we produced an audiobook edition of *For the Life of the World* because Schmemmann describes so beautifully both the heretical character of modern secularism and the appropriate Christian response to modernity’s waywardness. Near the end of the book, he insists that “if secularism is, as I am convinced, the great heresy of our own time, it requires from the Church not mere anathemas, and certainly not compromises, but above all an effort of understanding so it may ultimately be overcome by truth.”

I can think of no better summary of the mandate behind the work of MARS HILL AUDIO. It’s easy to condemn the errors of modernity, and it may be tempting for many to conform to the pattern of those errors. But for three decades, our interviews and commentary have always been pursued with the goal of understanding why those errors seem so plausible to our contemporaries and how the witness of our own lives might be made more truthful.

Our work is impossible to pursue without the thoughtful help of our listeners. I hope that you will consider making a generous year-end gift to enable us to continue sharing with you and many others the insights of thinkers whose work is worthy of a wider audience. The times require us to recalibrate our thoughts as we lift up our hearts.

Gratefully,



Ken Myers  
Host and producer