

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Song of the day:

Once in Royal David's City

A lot of old hymnals used to have sections marked off with songs especially meant for children to sing. In *The Hymnal 1940* that section included the Christmas carol, *Once in Royal David's City*, written in 1848 by Cecil Frances Alexander. Think of a Victorian lady in a big frilly dress and hat, walking to an Anglican church with seven or eight children in tow. Mrs. Alexander didn't have the children, but she was that lady, and she spent her life writing poetry, much of it for children, and working for the poor in England, especially children and "fallen women," that is, women who bore children out of wedlock.

Mrs. Alexander sees the child Jesus as a model not only for British children but for all people. Jesus came down from heaven as a mere child, and that fits well with his coming down in so humble a way, so that none of the important people would notice. "Once in royal David's city," the carol begins, "stood a lowly cattle shed." That's a surprise right there.

Jesus is the Son of David. In Jesus God fulfills His promise to David, that his kingdom shall endure forever. Yet Jesus, in the same city of the royal David, is laid in a manger in a cattle shed. "With the poor and meek and lowly," we sing in the second stanza, "lived on earth our Savior holy."

If that is so, then we children can take our lead from Jesus. If our Lord submitted himself to Mary and Joseph, "and was obedient to them" (Luke 2:51), literally *placing himself beneath* their authority in the order of the household, who are we to think we are too good or too high and mighty to obey? We should pay attention to the Child-Lord and imitate what he is doing:

*And through all his wondrous childhood,
He would honor and obey,
Love, and watch the lowly maiden
In whose gentle arms he lay;
Christian children all must be
Mild, obedient, good as he.*

Here, good reader, you may knit your brow. "I don't recall that stanza about obedience," you



say. There's a reason why not. It's not in your hymnal. A lot of hymnals omit it. The editors of the appalling *New Century Hymnal* even twist themselves into pretzels to avoid calling Jesus "he." Gosh, wasn't he a boy? They go so far as to imagine Mary as a carpenter, I guess, "whose strong arms a cradle made." Mary, with a hammer in one hand, a plank in the other, a nail between her teeth, and the baby Jesus at her foot. Oh, I suppose that it's her arms that are the cradle. Maybe that's what it's supposed to mean. But why didn't they just leave the good poem alone? If you're in charge of a museum, do you get out your watercolors and fool around with a painting by Leonardo da Vinci? Please, you editors of hymnals – you are not Leonardo da Vinci, or even Mrs. Alexander. Hands off!

If your hymnal is *Worship III* or *Gather*, you'll have the stanza, but with an odd change. Mrs. Alexander was laying special importance on being meek, pliable, and obedient: so she uses the word *mild* in that last line above. "Learn from me," says Jesus, "for I am meek and humble of heart" (Matt. 11:29). What's wrong with that? Nothing, says Mrs. Alexander, for Jesus "is our childhood's pattern." He was like us, "little, weak, and helpless" as a baby. He grew like us, day by day. He knew both tears and joy. We children

then should toddle in his footsteps.

For Jesus does and does not remain that child forever. That is why the final stanza, which a lot of hymnals leave out, takes us back to the scene of Jesus' birth, but only to compare it with the glory to come:

*Not in that poor lowly stable,
With the oxen standing by,
We shall see him; but in heaven,
Set at God's right hand on high:
When like stars his children crowned,
All in white shall wait around.*

*"Other than Mary and Joseph,
the oxen were the first living
things to look upon the Lord.
We will take their place in the
eternal nativity scene, looking
upon Christ seated at the right
hand of God."*

"Beloved," says Saint John, "we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Other than Mary and Joseph, the oxen were the first living things to

look upon the Lord. We will take their place in the eternal nativity scene, looking upon Christ seated at the right hand of God. We will be crowned like stars, and we will wait upon Him now, as we once waited upon the mother and father we obeyed when we were children.



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