

A FESTIVAL *of* NINE LESSONS AND CAROLS

A LIVING TRADITION

A FESTIVAL *of* NINE LESSONS AND CAROLS was first held on Christmas Eve, 1918. It was planned by Eric Milner-White, who at the age of thirty-four had just been appointed Dean of King's. His experience as an army chaplain had convinced him that the Church of England needed more imaginative worship.

Although imaginative, the 1918 service was, in fact, adapted from one drawn up by the then Bishop of Truro, later Archbishop of Canterbury, E.W. Benson. The first Truro service took place in 1880 in the large wooden structure affectionately known as a 'shed', which then served as Truro Cathedral. It wasn't an afternoon service but took place at 10.00 pm, and was intended to draw people away from the teeming public houses.

Archbishop Benson's son, Arthur Benson, who studied at King's and became Master of Magdalene College, recalled:

My father arranged from ancient sources a little service for Christmas Eve—nine carols and nine tiny lessons, which were read by various officers of the Church, beginning with a chorister, and ending, through the different grades, with the Bishop.

Other churches adapted the service for their own use as soon as they heard about it: King's was by no means one of the earliest adopters. What made Milner-White's appropriation so significant, however, was that he introduced it immediately after the end of the First World War and used it as an occasion

to invite the city to fill a Chapel that would have been far too big for the much-decimated post-war College community. To mark the occasion, Milner-White added what he called a 'Bidding Prayer' to the service handed down from Truro.

It begins with a call to prayer and meditation that invites those who hear it to go 'even unto Bethlehem' in their imaginations. He calls all to make the Chapel 'glad with our carols of praise'. Then he rightly and movingly urges the congregation to hold in prayer the many who then, as now, would be far from glad in their personal or shared suffering. Finally, boldly and characteristically, he invites the whole company to extend their prayer for those who have passed on from this mortal life. In the congregation that day would have been many who had been bereaved by the violence of war and who recalled their own loved ones when it came to the sentence:

And lastly let us remember before God all those who rejoice with us but on another shore and in a greater light.

In 1928 the service was broadcast live on the wireless by the BBC and proved to be extremely popular. With the exception of 1930, it has been broadcast annually.

It was heard for the first time overseas when, in 1932, just six days after the BBC's 'Empire Service' was inaugurated, it was transmitted on short-wave radio. In the years that followed, it was relayed to Italy, Switzerland France and the United States. The number of listeners in the United States is huge, with Minnesota Public Radio relaying it to over 400 other stations. In total there are estimated to be several hundred million listeners worldwide.

In 1954 the BBC brought cameras into the Chapel and the service was presented in abridged form on the then very new medium of Television. For several decades this took place every few years, but now the recording of *Carols from King's* for BBC Two is an annual event, which further extends the reach of the iconic *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*.

The *Festival*—which is both a service and somehow more than a service—has had to survive several challenges. During the Second World War, the sixteenth-century glass was removed from the Chapel. Nonetheless, the service and the broadcast went ahead. The location was kept secret for security reasons, but the flapping of tar-paper in the background was a giveaway to those in the know.

In 2020 the Covid pandemic was a huge threat to public and personal health, so there was no mass gathering of people and no singing of carols in the Chapel on Christmas Eve: though a small number of College members gathered for a socially distanced service of Evening Prayer. There was a broadcast, however, as all the music and all the readings, together with the Bidding Prayer and Blessing, had been pre-recorded—just in case.

MUSIC & LITURGY

In 1918, the music was directed by Organist Arthur Henry Mann. Mann had been in post for forty-two years and was not immediately impressed with the young Dean's idea of replacing the standard service of 'Evensong with Carols'. Nonetheless it went ahead, and the College has never looked back.

It is perhaps a frustration to those who like to imagine that the King's service is a completely timeless masterpiece to realise that it was changed in several ways between 1918 and 1919. Some of the lessons were rearranged, a series of benedictions were removed—leaving only one, which is still said, immediately after the Lord's Prayer. It was in 1919, however, that the service first began with the hymn *Once in royal David's city*; a tradition that has certainly stuck. Since then the overall shape of the service has hardly changed.

The music has, however, changed dramatically since the first services. Firstly, there is much more of it now than there was in 1918. Secondly, every year there are new arrangements of familiar carols to be aired, new, as well as familiar, descants to be enjoyed, and every year since 1983 a completely new carol has been commissioned.

As for the choir, that too varies all the time as different members come and go, and as different Organists and Directors of Music employ different training techniques and explore the Chapel's unique acoustic properties in their own way. The lineup has remained extraordinarily constant, however: 16 boy choristers in the front row and behind them 14 or so young men, most of whom have been undergraduates, reading for degrees in various subjects at King's. Today, as in 1918, the back row consists of a mixture of Choral Scholars and Lay Clerks. In the organ loft there has almost always been one or two organ scholars. Like their choral colleagues, these are undergraduate members of the College who have the challenge of holding together the demands of a rigorous degree, while playing a huge instrument for daily services—and on Christmas Eve, knowing that there are countless millions listening to the sounds made as their

hands and feet bring the organ, and indeed the whole Chapel, to life.

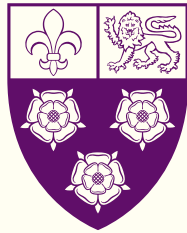
The broadcasts have become part of Christmas for many who live far from Cambridge. One correspondent wrote that he heard the service in a tent on the foothills of Everest; another, in the desert. Plenty listen on the radio as they travel. The service will be heard in hospital wards and care homes, playing in the background while people are at work. Many listen at home, some busy with their last-minute domestic preparations for Christmas, others sitting quietly, alone or with family or specially invited friends, joining with the Chapel congregation in meditation, awe and wonder as they intently follow the service.

The centre and meaning of that service is still found by those who as Milner-White intended, 'go in heart and mind to Bethlehem' and who follow the eternal story of the loving purposes of God, wherever it takes them.

The Revd Dr Stephen Cherry
Dean of Chapel

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

WHILE freshly written in 2022, this reflection owes much to the anonymous history of the service that has, in previous years, been included in the Order of Service.



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