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ADVENT CAROLS AND HYMNS

Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols

Background

There is little justification for any extended set of reflections on the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. The whole point is to allow the carols and readings to speak for themselves. Extensive commentary can actually intrude. Nonetheless, there is always a danger that such services can take one back into some imaginary childhood and appeal overmuch to the child that still exists within us and not only fail to speak to the world as it is but actually encourage a temporary flight from it. This was hardly the intention of the Scriptural writers or – at least in some cases – the composers and compilers of the carols.

The challenge is to make the link but in a non-obtrusive way. This can be done in the opening words of welcome, the prayers, the notes prepared for the service, etc.

Origins and Background of the Festival

The format of nine lessons and carols is said to derive from the church's traditional service of Matins, with its three sets of psalms, readings and responsorials. The adaptation of these for a "Festal Service for Christmas Eve" consisting of "nine carols and nine tiny lessons" was in 1880 – nearly 40 years before the first performance at King's (1918). It was undertaken by the first Bishop of Truro, Edward White Benson, although the suggestion is said to have come from G.H.S. Walpole, later Bishop of Edinburgh. It took place in a temporary wooden cathedral. The present cathedral had not even been built. The two foundation stones had just been laid by the Prince of Wales only a few months earlier.

Shape of the Service

Although the carols vary from year to year, the basic plan of the Festival is to trace the story of Christ's coming from God's act of creation, humanity's fall, and God's promise of a redeemer who would restore all things.

King's College Current Lessons

First	Genesis 3: 8–15, 17–19
Second	Genesis 22: 15–18
Third	Isaiah 9: 2, 6–7
Fourth	Isaiah 11: 1–3a, 4a; 6–9
Fifth	Luke 1: 26–35, 38
Sixth	Luke 2: 1, 3–7
Seventh	Luke 2: 8–16
Eighth	Matthew 2: 1–12

Truro Cathedral Original Lessons

First	Genesis 3: 8–15, 17–19
Second	Genesis 22: 15–18
Third	Numbers 24:15–18
Fourth	Isaiah 9: 2, 6–7
Fifth	Micah
Sixth	Luke 2: 8–16
Seventh	John 1: 1–14
Eighth	Galatians 4: 4–8

Truro Cathedral Original Music

First	The Lord at first had Adam made
Fourth	Handel's Messiah: For unto us a Child is born
Sixth	Handel's Messiah: "There were shepherds abiding in the fields..."
Seventh	O Come All Ye Faithful

Further Information

King's College website:

<https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/chapel/a-festival-of-nine-lessons-and-carols>