

## “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

By ROBERT D. KALIS

ON CHRISTMAS EVE, 1865, a pilgrim travelled on horseback from Jerusalem to the “City of David.” It was already dark when the rider found the “Shepherds Field” and dismounted. Now it was evident why the rider had appeared somewhat awkward in the saddle. It was because of his size. A giant of a man, he stood six feet six inches tall and weighed nearly 300 pounds. The traveler would have been more at home in a pulpit than on horseback, for he was none other than Phillips Brooks, a prince among American preachers.

As he wandered over the same fields where many years before the angels had proclaimed the “good tidings of great joy,” Brooks noted that shepherds were still keeping watch over their sheep in the vicinity. The preacher looked up into the starlit sky. His spirit drifted back to the glorious night of the Savior’s birth. It was a moment of great inspiration.

He followed the steps of the shepherds who went to Bethlehem to see “this thing which is come to pass.” There, in the Church of the Nativity built, according to tradition, over the place where the Lord Jesus was born, Brooks assisted in a midnight service. As carol after carol was sung on that historic and sacred ground, the great preacher’s thoughts turned to the boys and girls of his Sunday school in Philadelphia.

Later he wrote to them of his Christmas Eve pilgrimage: “I remember standing in the old church in Bethlehem, close to the spot where Jesus was born, when the whole church was ringing hour after hour with splendid hymns of praise of God, how again and again it seemed as if I could hear voices I knew well, telling each other of the *Wonderful Night* of the Savior’s birth as I heard them a year before; and I assure you, I was glad to shut my ears a while and listen to the more familiar strains that came wandering to me halfway round the world.”

There, in the City of David, where the Psalmist of Israel had been inspired to write some of his sacred songs and where the angels had brought the “good tidings of great joy,” the inspiration for another carol was given to Phillips Brooks.

It was three years later, exactly one hundred years ago, that Louis Redner, Sunday school super-

intendent and organist of Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, asked his Pastor, Phillips Brooks, to give him a hymn for the Christmas celebration. The organist volunteered that if Brooks would write a hymn, it should be named *St. Philip*. Whereupon Brooks replied that if Redner should write the tune, it should be named *St. Louis*. Rather than write a new carol, Brooks gave the organist his poem of Christmas 1865: *O Little Town Of Bethlehem*.

Redner tried several melodies but could not get the tune to match the words. He himself tells that finally, the night before the music was needed, “I was roused from sleep late in the night hearing an angel whispering in my ear.” He rose and jotted down the tune before it went from him and returned to sleep. The harmony was filled in the next morning. The new carol was ready in time for the children to learn it quickly and introduce it at the Christmas service in 1868. The tune was named *St. Louis*.

One of the original five stanzas is usually omitted. Since it is not readily available we include it here:

*Where children pure and happy  
Pray to the Holy Child,  
Where misery cries out to thee,  
Son of the Mother mild;  
Where Charity stands watching,  
And Faith holds wide the door,  
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks,  
And Christmas comes once more.*

One year later, Phillips Brooks, the great preacher and friend, of children, left Philadelphia for Boston. There in the city where he had been born on December 13, 1835, he preached Christ and Christ crucified so powerfully and radiantly that many testified of him that he was more Christ-like in appearance and demeanor than any other man. When told of his death, which occurred on January 23, 1893, a little five-year-old friend of the preacher exclaimed, “Oh, Mama, how happy the angels will be!”

We could not do better, this Christmas, than to make the eloquent prayer of the last stanza of *O Little Town Of Bethlehem* our Christmas prayer:

*O holy Child of Bethlehem!  
Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin, and enter in,  
Be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us,  
Our Lord Immanuel!*