

11<sup>th</sup> December 2020

## Familiar

**“A man does not wonder at what he sees frequently,  
even though he be ignorant of the reason.”**

*Cicero, De Divinatione*

We all like familiarity at Christmas, especially around our favourite Carols. Take a well-known carol and set it to a different tune or take a Christmas tune and apply it to other words, and it doesn't feel right.

A good example is the hymn *Joy to the World* by Isaac Watts. Watts is often called “the godfather of English hymnody” and *Joy to the World*, published in 1719, was based on verses from Psalm 96 and Genesis 3. It isn't a direct paraphrase, and, indeed, Watts avoided the trickier parts of the Psalm, but his words are clearly influenced by his depth of Bible knowledge. The tune we “traditionally” use is *Antioch* by Lowell Mason, a well-known American composer and arranger. When it was published in 1848 it was described as being “from Handel” because the first four notes were familiar from the opening of *Lift Up Your Heads* from Handel's *Messiah*, and Mason was a great admirer and scholar of Handel's music. The truth is, several tunes closely resemble “Antioch”. The tune “Comfort”, for example, which is very similar, appeared in W Holford's *Voce di Melodia* in the 1830s. Indeed, in the hymnbook I use, the title given to the melody covers all these bases and is called: “Antioch (Comfort [Mason])”.

But, one way or another, whatever the influences on Watts for the lyrics or Mason for the tune, something quite remarkable and long-lasting has been created for us to enjoy every Christmas. For generations, *Joy to the World* has been a favourite Carol. Familiar words with a familiar melody as part of the familiarity of this season, and it just feels right.

Sometimes, familiarity should be challenged, with different ideas and practices replacing what may have become tired and *over*-familiar. Christmas is no different. But let's not dispense with familiarity just for the sake of newness. If Cicero is right, we may not wonder at what we see – and sing – at Christmas because we do it so frequently. Maybe we do it because it just feels right. That, surely, can be reason enough.

### **A prayer for today**

*Lord, your Love is familiar, and I say so frequently.*

*Do I have to have a reason? Amen*

An original reflection ©Tom Gordon

Also available at <https://swallowsnestnet.wordpress.com>