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The Second Sunday after Christmas

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SPINKS AND OUZLES SING SUBLIMELY

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The music of Christmas is extra-ordinary rich and spiritual. I spend a good deal of free time not only in December but also in January listening to my favourite recordings. The season also has poetic riches. Below I have compiled a garland of verse that gives me seasonal pleasure.

First on my list is the missing stanza from the "Hymn for Christmas Day", written by CHARLES WESLEY (1707-1788), better known as "Hark! The herald angels sing". It plays off the protevangelium, the first promulgation of the gospel, Genesis 3:15: God's word to the serpent, that Eve's seed – Christ and all his members - would bruise the serpent's head – the power of temptation and sin.

Come, Desire of Nations, come:

Fix in us thy humble home!

Rise, the Woman's conquering Seed,

Bruise in us the Serpent's head!

Adam's likeness, Lord efface:

Stamp thy image in its place!

Second Adam, from above,

Reinstate us in thy love!

Second on my list is another 18th century poet, CHRISTOPHER ('KIT') SMART (1722-1771), famous for time spent in an insane asylum and dying in debtors' prison. It is very 18th century – from its regular, tripping meter to the use of "Solyma", the Latin version of "Jerusalem". But the classicism never becomes pompous or dull. The "spinks and ouzles" of the second last stanza always makes me smile – I believe they are songbirds. The "Mosaic thorn" is a reference to the rod of Aaron, and to the Glastonbury thorn, whose miraculous bursting into blossom signified the Incarnation.

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD
AND SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST

Where is this stupendous stranger?
Swains of Solyma, advise;
Lead me to my Master's manger,
Show me where my Saviour lies.

O Most Mighty! O Most Holy!
Far beyond the seraph's thought,
Art thou then so mean and lowly
As unheeded prophets taught?
O the magnitude of meekness!
Worth from worth immortal sprung;
O the strength of infant weakness,
If eternal is so young!

If so young and thus eternal,
Michael tune the shepherd's reed,
Where the scenes are ever vernal,
And the loves be love indeed!

See the God blasphem'd and doubted
In the schools of Greece and Rome;
See the pow'rs of darkness routed,
Taken at their utmost gloom.

Nature's decorations glisten

Far above their usual trim;
Birds on box and laurels listen,
As so near the cherubs hymn.

Boreas now no longer winters
On the desolated coast;
Oaks no more are riv'n in splinters
By the whirlwind and his host.

Spinks and ouzles sing sublimely,
"We too have a Saviour born";
Whiter blossoms burst untimely
On the blest Mosaic thorn.

God all-bounteous, all-creative,
Whom no ills from good dissuade,
Is incarnate, and a native
Of the very world he made.

HENRY VAUGHAN THE SILURIST (1622-1695), is one of the 17th century priest-poets like George Herbert (who much influenced him) and Thomas Traherne, his near neighbour and contemporary.

ON CHRIST'S NATIVITY

I would I were some Bird, or star,
Flutt'ring in Woods, or lifted far
Above this Inne
And rode of sin!
Then either Star or Bird should be
Shining or singing still to thee.

I would I had in my best part
Fit Roomes for thee! Or that my heart
Were so clean as
Thy Manger was!
But I am all filth, and obscene;
Yet, if thou wilt, thou canst make clean.

R. S. THOMAS (1913-2000) a Welsh priest-poet, returns us to the 20th century, with a characteristically conscience-troubling commentary whose bitter taste is made palatable by its purity.

CHRISTMAS

There is a morning;
Time brings it nearer,
Brittle with frost
And starlight. The owls sing
In the parishes. The people rise
And walk to the churches'
Stone lanterns, there to kneel
And eat the new bread
Of love, washing it down
With the sharp taste
Of blood they will shed.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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