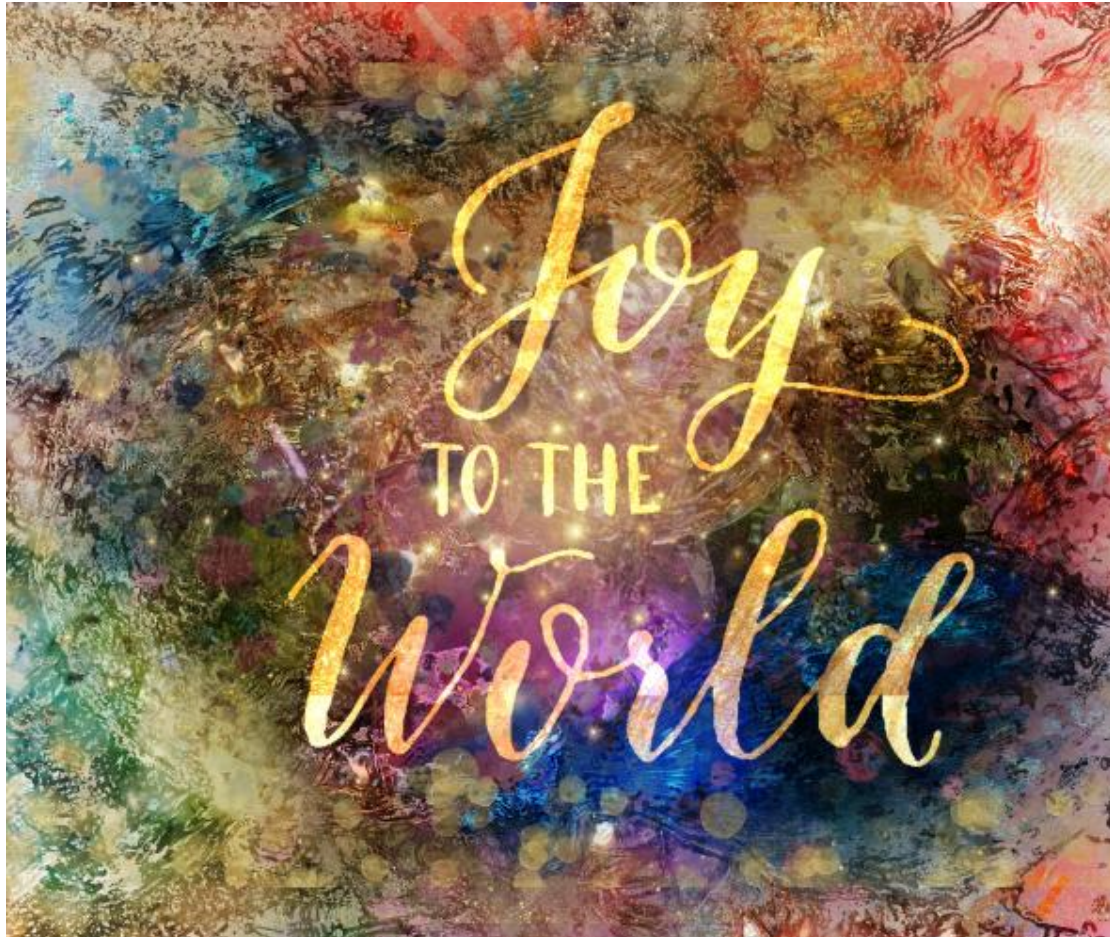


“Joy to the World” a Christmas Carol, or perhaps not!



By **Revd Mark Ackford** on 25/11/2025



The moment the familiar refrain begins—Joy to the world, the Lord is come! — churches globally transition into the Christmas season. It is, perhaps, the most ubiquitous English-language Christmas carol. Yet, the story behind "Joy to the World" reveals a deeper, more profound truth: it was never actually intended to be a Christmas carol about the nativity at all.

This powerful carol is the enduring legacy of Isaac Watts (1674–1748) who is commemorated by the Church of England on the 25th of November a month before Christmas Day. He was a dissenting minister, prolific poet, and the father of English hymnody. Watts revolutionized congregational singing by moving away from strictly metrical psalms to more expressive, contemporary interpretations of biblical texts. His genius lay in making Old Testament scriptures "speak the

language of the New Testament," infusing ancient psalms with Christian theology.

"Joy to the World" is a perfect example of this approach. Published in his 1719 collection *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*, the text is a creative rendering of Psalm 98. The Psalm itself is a call for all the earth to celebrate God's arrival to judge and rule the world righteously.

Watts interpreted this text not as a prophecy of the humble birth in Bethlehem's stable, but as a triumphant anthem for Christ's glorious Second Coming—His ultimate Advent, the church liturgical season which starts this upcoming Sunday the 30th of November.

The season of Advent is a unique liturgical period. It holds a dual focus: we look back to commemorate the first Advent of Jesus as a baby, while simultaneously looking forward in hopeful anticipation of His second Advent as sovereign King.

Watts' lyrics beautifully capture this forward-looking expectation, making it a profound hymn for the entire Advent season. Here are the words of a verse that some hymn books omit which have a particular hope of this.

"No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found."

I have included them as these lines evoke imagery from the Garden of Eden and the Fall, speaking not of a new born infant, but of a cosmic ruler who arrives to definitively reverse the curse of sin and restore creation. Which is probably why it is a verse that is often absent if it is sung as a Christmas Carol.

The "joys" Watts describes are not merely holiday cheer, but the profound joy of a world made new under Christ's perfect reign. The earth receives its King, not just its saviour.

It wasn't until much later, likely the mid-19th century when Lowell Mason adapted Handel's "Messiah" (specifically the "Comfort Ye" and "Lift Up Your Heads" sections) to create the tune we use today, that "Joy to the World" became firmly cemented in our Christmas services.

By understanding Watts' original intent, we can also sing this beloved carol during the season of Advent with a richer appreciation. It challenges us to look

beyond the manger and lift our eyes toward the horizon. "Joy to the World" is a powerful reminder that our faith is rooted in the anticipation of a Kingdom that is coming in fullness—a world where the Lord has truly come to reign forevermore.

Isaac Watts gave us more than a Carol with a catchy tune; he gave us a theological anchor, reminding us that the greatest joy is the promised return of our King, who will make "His blessings flow far as the curse is found."

Have a prayerful and blessed Advent.