

Hymn of the Week

Advent I

Lo! He comes with clouds descending

Words: Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Tune: Helmsley by Thomas Olivers (1725–1799)

This week's hymn, sometimes ranked among the top four hymns ever written, for me simply epitomises the whole message of Advent. Casting aside all the glitter, excess, and absurd expectations with which we are constantly bombarded in the media from September onwards, the text, with piercing accuracy takes us straight to the reality of the Second Coming portrayed in Revelation 1.7 and our need for some serious preparation in readiness for that.

Charles Wesley is arguably the greatest hymn writer of all time both in quality and quantity having written well over 6,500 hymns in his lifetime. Wesley was born at Epworth in Lincolnshire where his father, one of the many Samuels in the family was Rector; of the 18 siblings, Charles, John and Samuel the Younger went on to become Anglican priests and although actively involved in the Methodist movement for which the family are best known, Charles resolutely adhered to his Anglican priesthood although he, like his brothers, was not averse to preaching in the open air in places where they and their message were not welcomed in the parish church.

Charles and his wife Sarah produced eight children of whom only three survived, confusingly two of these were named Charles and Samuel and both were talented musicians and composers hence the bewildering proliferation of music under the name of Wesley.

The tune Helmsley has a rather chequered background it being first written down by Thomas Olivers who is said to have heard it being sung in the street. Olivers was a Welsh ne'er do well who, after a misspent youth experienced something of a damascene conversion and struck up a friendship with John Wesley becoming an ardent Methodist preacher.

The tune was developed and harmonised by Rev. Martin Madan another Wesley follower who published it in the "Lock 'Collection of Hymn and Psalm Tunes". Madan was the chaplain to the Lock Hospital at Hyde Park Corner; for those unfamiliar with medical history, I should explain that a "Lock" hospital treated what we would now term sexually transmitted diseases. Although initially a respected preacher in 1780, Madan raised a storm of opposition by the publication of his *Thelyphthora, or A Treatise on Female Ruin*, in which he advocated polygamy as the remedy for the evils he deplored.

As with so many, the hymn has not been without critics in our world of absurd “correctness” with some suggesting that reference to “those who set at naught and sold him, pierced and nailed him to the tree” explicitly refers to Judas and the Jewish people whereas I think and hope we can all recognise that Jesus died on the cross to atone for the sins of every single one of us.

The hymn is sung here with beautiful sensitivity by the choir of Litchfield Cathedral

<https://youtu.be/jjn3fBTvBjY?list=RDjjn3fBTvBjY>

Keith Day

23rd November 2025