

## Hymns of the Faith: “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi  
with  
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Bill Wymond*

**Dr. Wymond:** Good morning! This is “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith.”... And now here with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

**Dr. Duncan:** Thank you, Bill Wymond! This is Ligon Duncan, and we are here for “Hymns of the Faith” along with Derek Thomas this morning. Good morning, Derek! Glad to be with you again, and glad to be studying yet another classic hymn of the Christian church. This is one of those hymns ...we sing it as a carol, really, at Christmastime, but it's one of those hymns that makes me so thankful for the legacy of the whole church to the hymnody that we sing. It stretches way, way back in time. The melody itself is a seventeenth century melody, so in the range of four hundred years old; but the text has a history that stretches all the way back into the fifth century, so you're into the 400's...you're in the time of early Christianity, and the text was adapted for this particular setting in the nineteenth century. So you've got contributions from the fifth century, from the seventeenth century, from the nineteenth century, all in this beautiful hymn that's now sung very often in English-speaking churches at Christmastime, Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence.

It's set, Derek, in the context of a liturgy. It's drawn from the context of a liturgy. Maybe you could tell us first of all what a liturgy is. Some Protestants won't know what liturgy means. You and Bill both teach worship at Reformed Theological Seminary, and I think I've seen you use before Bard Thompson's History of the Western Liturgies, and things of that nature. But tell people what in the world is a liturgy?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, I guess the simplest answer to that is an order of service, beginning usually with some kind of call to worship. It includes hymns and prayers and reading of Scripture, and a sermon, and a benediction. Now, you can have a minimalist liturgy or a maximalist liturgy. Some of our Presbyterian friends that you and I both know will probably say they don't have a liturgy (which isn't correct; everybody has a liturgy). Some of the liturgies, of course, and some of the items of the liturgy that we would use go back to New Testament times...in

fact, go back to Old Testament times, like a benediction; pronouncing the Aaronic benediction at, say, a baptism, which has long-standing Presbyterian roots. But of course that's an Old Testament practice.

This particular text is said to have come from the Liturgy of St. James. We know of it at least — you said the fifth century, and some would even push it back into the fourth century, and some insist that the James here is James the Less (the Lord's half-brother James). That's probably doubtful. More likely is its attribution to Cyril of Jerusalem. In any case, you've got a text here that goes back 1500 or 1600 years.

**Dr. Duncan:** Now for me, the minute I hear the title Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence, I've got that tune which always sounded to me “plainsong-y.” But it tells me that it's a French melody from the seventeenth century. Now for other people, Bill, that music may not pop up into their ears, so would you just play through it once so that people know exactly what we're talking about? Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence. [Dr. Wymond plays.]

Tell us just a little bit about the music. I noticed that the tune name that has been given to it is PICARDY. I don't know how the French would say that, but it's listed as a French melody arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams. So tell us what we're hearing there.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, this is a French folk song melody from the 1600's, or the seventh century, but it clearly has roots in Gregorian chant that are not even disguised. It's really a Gregorian chant or plainchant melody. So often the popular songs (especially the carols were some of the first) that were secular in a sense, in that they were not part of the church's liturgy musically, and so the people would hear these melodies in church and they would come out and make popular carols out of them, with a religious theme. And so they were songs of the people, but definitely rooted in the melody of the church.

And what I like about this melody is that it's very simple; and fortunately in the setting of it that we have, which is by Ralph Vaughan Williams, he keeps a very simple accompaniment to the tune. There's a whole school of study about how to accompany plainchant, and one of the emphases always is on simplicity. I just started it out when I played it showing the melody, but what I would like to do is just to play a little bit of his accompaniment. [Plays.] So you just see just bare chords under that, and that's just the right way to do this melody. In fact, I really like for us to do it without any harmony and just sing the melody when we sing it as a congregation.

**Dr. Duncan:** That is interesting to me. There are several older hymns of the church that we sing ...and I mean hymns that stretch back to the early days of the church, I don't mean hymns from 1893...I mean really older hymns of the church that are set for unison. Now I know that Calvin wanted the congregation

to sing unison. The fact that he made a point of that must mean that there was part-singing going on somewhere in churches in his time, but obviously unison singing was something that had a very old pedigree in the church. What's the background to that?

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, by Calvin's time there was a whole body of church music that had parts, and some rather complicated. The elaborate part settings had their origin in the school at Notre Dame in Paris in the 1200's, and by the time of Calvin these parts had become really complex, sometimes so that they obscured the meaning of the text and the melody. They became almost too musically complicated to be useful for worship, and so Calvin wanted to just clear the boards and start over again. Of course he started with all original melodies, too, to fit the Psalm texts that he did. And while he did not want harmony used in Geneva, he did permit Louis Bourgeois, who did a lot of the melodies for him, to actually set these to four-part harmonies which were not used in Geneva but were used in other parts of France. He allowed that to be done.

**Dr. Duncan:** Bill, this song has a mysterious sound to it — almost a mournful sound to it. Why?

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, the mournfulness of course comes from the minor key that it is in. In our musical system we have major scales and minor scales, and a major scale goes like this...[plays]...and a minor scale just changes one note, and it's...[plays]. All the difference in the world, so that instead of...[plays]...it's...[plays] and that makes it minor. And minor scales to us have a more mournful or serious sound.

**Dr. Duncan:** And that scale you just played reminds me of the difference, and here are two songs very similar based on plainsong chant : Of the Father's Love Begotten and Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence. Let All Mortal Flesh goes this minor and more mysterious direction, and then Of the Father's Love Begotten a brighter, happier kind of direction because of the key that's used. Would this presumably have been sung by the monks or the choristers in the days of the early church, and would have been very, very legato and sustained as they sang?

**Dr. Wymond:** And free. Very free. It was not really just “tight-tight” rhythmically. They had free-flowing lines. And as this was done probably in the marketplace by the people, again there it was probably sung with lute accompaniment or something like that, just as they would have done What Child Is This? or something of basically the same time.

**Dr. Duncan:** Derek, go back to liturgy again. You were telling us that this song apparently comes from the setting of the Liturgy of St. James, and you told us what a liturgy was — that's it's a stated order of worship. And we do have lots of written liturgies from the days of the early church; I guess stretching back into the

second century, we still have some of the written liturgies. Hippolytus in the second century AD gave us some of the early liturgies of the church that are still extant today. But tell us a little bit more about the Liturgy of St. James and what we know about liturgies from that period, and how this song would have fit in with that.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes, well, it appears as though in what we now would call the Eastern Orthodox tradition this particular text would have been associated with the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper. And I'm not sure whether this would have been sung by a choir or perhaps even recited by the congregation, or maybe chanted by choristers or the presenter, or maybe the congregation. I suspect not the whole congregation.

**Dr. Duncan:** Could I stop? Because you've used the word chant, and I think you mean that word technically, and I think that's something that's probably alien to most of...I mean, there may be some of our Anglican friends in the audience and some of our Catholic friends in the audience who know what a congregational chant is, but chanting was a part of worship very commonly in the Middle Ages but not so much now. What do we mean by a chant, Bill?

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, usually it's a more extended text to begin with, and often done in an antiphonal manner so that the leader or the priest would sing the first line, and then the choir would chant the second line (or if it were the congregation.) So there would be this wonderful give and take between the two.

**Dr. Duncan:** And lots of same notes. You know, I've seen these in missals and in other hymn books used in high liturgical congregations, whether Roman Catholic or High Anglican, and you'll have the leader start off and it will...[chants]...you'll have just one note, and you're just supposed to repeat it on all the words that you're doing.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, there is the Catholic/Orthodox kind of chant which is based more on the Gregorian system which has these flowing lovely melodies, and then there's what we call Anglican chant which other churches have taken on...some of the Presbyterians, and so on like that...where they have a simple melody and much of the words are said to just one note of that melody. If you were to do this in that manner, you might go... [chants]...so you do a number of words. And so it's a much simpler process. Actually, it's harder to do because the meter changes every time, and the choir has to practice how to sing it together.

**Dr. Thomas:** It's been a while now...I'm sure it's 25 years since I last was at an Anglican church, and probably a high Anglican church, where chanting was done on a regular basis. Now, I always got the impression that it was because of the impoverished ability of the congregation to sing, or the organist was 96 and couldn't play anymore so that chanting...is chanting meant to be easier? I can't imagine it being easy...

**Dr. Wymond:** Oh, no! Oh, it's so much harder! And I think Anglican chant is the hardest because of the irregular meter of every line.

**Dr. Thomas:** And if you've not heard it, it sounds a little odd.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, actually you can hear it well done, though, if you go to a place with a good boy choir around Christmas or Advent or something...

**Dr. Thomas:** You could listen to a service on the BBC, the daily service, in which regularly I think you would hear some chanting.

**Dr. Duncan:** But do you think that it was actually invented with a view to helping people that weren't good at singing? I mean, I can see...but now you're saying that's not the origin.

**Dr. Wymond:** I don't think so. I think it's a more elevated form, actually, of music. It's because it's more...well, almost sophisticated.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, it's almost speech-singing, you know. You're almost sort of talk-singing, as it were.

**Dr. Wymond:** It is. But again, it takes so much practice.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, sorry to take that side note, but you mentioned the chant and I thought it was worth picking up on. So at any rate, we're back to the liturgy again, Derek!

**Dr. Thomas:** What's interesting from this text ...you know we sing it as a carol, although not in my tradition. We would never have been able to sing this tune, I don't think, terribly well in the tradition I came from. But although it is about the incarnation and about Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus, the weight of the text is actually on the divinity of Jesus. And there were traditions — and I'm going to use a technical word now to explain it — monophysite traditions in the Syriac church, monophysite meaning one nature as opposed to two natures. Our orthodox doctrine tells us that Jesus had one person but two natures, divine and human. This text emphasizes the divine nature, and there was and still is a branch of the church that simply emphasizes that Jesus essentially had one nature. And they were able to sing this text in the Syriac, apparently. Now, it's a stretch, because there is certainly a reference to His birth and so on here in the text.

What is interesting to me is that there are some hymns that are capable of spanning both the Eastern and Western church, and for at least since the time of the Reformation there really has been little to none by way of contact and dialog between the church in the West and what we call the Orthodox Church — although as we speak, that dialogue is beginning. And I think in my seminary

education I learned virtually nothing about the Orthodox Church, to my shame I think. And there has been an attempt even from within our own circles at least to try and understand.

**Dr. Duncan:** Our friend, Robert Letham, has recently written a book on Eastern Orthodoxy called *Through Western Eyes*.

**Dr. Thomas:** A very, very helpful introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy.

**Dr. Wymond:** I think it's sort of interesting — right now in contemporary history, the Church of Rome has really made a rapprochement with the Orthodox, but the Russian patriarch has been really resistant, more for political reasons, because he does not want the Orthodox people to be engrafted into the Roman Catholic Church, if the Roman Catholic Church were to flourish in Russia. So that's been on and off again.

**Dr. Duncan:** The setting of this in the context of Eucharist is an interesting study, because actually as Protestants pulling it out of the context of the Eucharistic service and putting it into the context of a Christmas carol allows us to sort of throw ourselves into it and sing it to Christ as an acknowledgement of His divinity without any overtones of venerating the sacrament or et cetera.

**Dr. Thomas:** For us, incarnation takes us to Bethlehem, but in these circles incarnation means Jesus is being incarnated in some way in the bread and wine. And there are traditions (and Orthodoxy is one of them, and Catholicism — at least high Catholicism — is another) that tend to emphasize the Eucharist above everything else. And therefore this text is sometimes employed in a different setting to the one that we normally employ it in, namely Christmas.

**Dr. Duncan:** Walking through each stanza of the text, Derek, you have in the first stanza:

“Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand;  
Ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in His hand,  
Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand.”

So the picture there that's being painted is our standing in honor and respect, and holy fear and trembling, and awe at the very act of the incarnation, and tying that act of the incarnation to the work of redemption that Jesus Christ was going to accomplish on our behalf. And that is something that in the Eastern tradition stretches back at to least Athanasius with his strong insistence that the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, was absolutely necessary for our salvation.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes, and interestingly *The Trinity Hymnal*, which is the text I have before me, has probably inserted at the top a Scripture reference from Habakkuk

2:20, "The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him," a similar kind of text to John's apocalypse, the first chapter of Revelation, where John sees a vision of Christ and falls down as though he were dead...I think overtures of Isaiah 6 in this passage, too, of the "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts! Heaven and earth is full of Your glory...." That passage....

**Dr. Duncan:** I think it's also important to note, we've said it before on this program, that in the history of the church, really up until about the twelfth century, everybody did stand during services and this was considered to be a posture of respect, just like when Moses comes into the presence of the Lord at the burning bush he's told to take off his shoes because he's standing on holy ground. And so his act of standing in that regard is an act of showing respect, with shoes off, to the Creator who has manifest himself.

**Dr. Thomas:** What I like about it is the line "Ponder nothing earthly minded." And we often pray, at least in intent if not in practice, that the things of earth might grow strangely dim...

**Dr. Duncan:** "...in the light of His glory and grace."

**Dr. Thomas:** Right! And sometimes in the pastoral prayer we will say things like "help us not to think about those things that have consumed us during the week, that we might give our full attention to the worship of God."

**Dr. Duncan:** Yes. Our Westminster Confession of Faith even says that on the Lord's Day as we're focused on gathering with the people of God that our minds are to be free from worldly cares and thoughts...and it goes on to say recreations as well, but the whole idea is that the whole of ourselves are to be devoted to the object of our worship, the Lord God. It goes on to say,

"King of kings, yet born of Mary, as of old on earth He stood,  
Lord of lords, in human vesture, in the body and the blood,  
He will give to all the faithful His own self for heavenly food."

Now you can hear the echoes of Eucharist there, and those of us who are Protestants and singing it as a Christmas carol are going to take that in the direction of the incarnation, as you said, rather than the sacraments, as it were.

**Dr. Thomas:** The third stanza is one that I often think about when I'm worshipping, and that is that we worship in conjunction with the church triumphant, along with angels and archangels and cherubim and seraphim..."Rank on rank the host of heaven spreads its vanguard on the way...." And I think there's something deeply moving about contemplating that you are worshipping in the company of thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand of unseen saints and angels.

**Dr. Duncan:** And, Derek, that theme really continues on in the fourth stanza. So I think it's time, Bill, for us to listen to Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence.

**Dr. Wymond:** Singing this hymn today will be Ben Roberson.

Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand;  
Ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in His hand,  
Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand.

King of kings, yet born of Mary, as of old on earth He stood,  
Lord of lords, in human vesture, in the body and the blood,  
He will give to all the faithful His own self for heavenly food.

Rank on rank the host of heaven spreads its vanguard on the way,  
As the Light of light descendeth from the realms of endless day,  
That the powers of hell may vanish as the darkness clears away.

At His feet the six-winged seraph; cherubim, with sleepless eye,  
Veil their faces to the presence, as with ceaseless voice they cry,  
"Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, Lord Most High!"

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