

8.43

Luke 2:14—Ancient and Modern Poems

Luke 2:14 records the words of a song that the angels sang to shepherds on Christmas Eve, the night of Jesus's birth.

Early in church history, the words of this song were translated into Latin and became a standard part of weekly liturgical services. The song was called the "Glória in Excélsis": "Glória in excélsis Deo et in terra pax homínibus bonæ voluntátis"

The "Gloria in Excelsis" continues to be sung regularly in most churches that use liturgical worship, though the words are often translated into English or another appropriate language: "Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth."

Verses are often added (to Latin and other versions). This liturgical usage made the words of the angels' song even better known than they would have been otherwise, and they are frequently referenced in Western literature.

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–92): The American Quaker and abolitionist associates the angels' song with human yearning:

Lend, once again, that holy song a tongue,
Which the glad angels of the Advent sung,
Their cradle-anthem for the Saviour's birth,
Glory to God, and peace unto the earth.

From "The Peace Convention at Brussels"

Robert Bridges (1844–1930): In 1913, Bridges, the poet laureate of Britain, could use the Latin phrase for “peace on earth among people of good will” and trust his audience would understand. On the eve of World War I, he called his countryfolk to aspire to “*pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*” (“Noel: Christmas Eve, 1913”).

Bono (1960–): The British lyricist born Paul David Hewson, whose stage name with U2 is Bono, is skeptical whether there will ever be fulfillment of the words, which he attributes to Jesus himself rather to the angels celebrating his birth.

Jesus, in the song you wrote
The words are sticking in my throat
Peace on earth
Hear it every Christmas time

From “Peace on Earth”