

Wenceslas:

IN STORY AND CAROL

*"Good King Wenceslas look'd out
On the Feast of Stephen. . . ."*

In all probability you are familiar with this old English carol. Maybe you sang it during the last Christmas season. But it is quite as probable that you may wonder who may be the subject of this quaint song.

The beginnings of Christianity in Moravia and Bohemia are associated with the names of three saints: Sts. Cyril and Methodius, and St. Wenceslas.

St. Wenceslas, who was born around A.D. 900, was the first Christian ruler of Bohemia. Wenceslas ascended the Bohemian throne in 921 as a comparatively well-educated prince who read the Psalms and the Gospels in Latin, "as if he were a bishop, and he also read Slavonic with ease." At this time, a majority of rulers found it mentally exhausting even to sign their names on state documents.

Contemporary accounts state that "he was perfect in faith, fulfilling the works of mercy, feeding and clothing the poor, protecting the widows and children, and freeing prisoners. He showed hospitality to strangers and was full of concern for all, great and humble alike, and cared for the welfare of all."



St. Wenceslas Chapel
St. Vitus Cathedral, Prague

Soon the countryside was full of stories about the saintly ruler who, accompanied by one or two servants, would go into the fields and vineyards to cut wheat and grapes to make the wafers and wine for the Holy Eucharist, or he would go thus to carry relief to the sick and needy. During his reign churches were ordered built in all towns and on all castles. He adorned and endowed them, and invited priests from many western countries "to serve day and night according to the ordinance of God and of his servant Wenceslas."

The violent and untimely death of this popular ruler added to the reports of his piety. He soon became the patron saint of Bohemia. To this day the heart of the beautiful Gothic Cathedral of St. Vitus, established in 1344, is the Chapel of Saint Wenceslas. The tomb is the original one made in 929, and it reposes on the same spot where it was placed in the original rotunda.

After the suppression of the independent national Church of Bohemia in 1620, religious refugees (Hussites and Moravians) arrived in hospitable England. They brought with them the story and legends of St. Wenceslas. "Good King Wenceslas", set to a sixteenth-century air by John Mason Neale (1818-1866), became a popular English Christmas carol.

(The text is condensed from an article in *The Living Church* and printed with the kind permission of the Editor, and that of the author, The Rev. Enrico S. Molnar of Pasadena, California.)



Good King Wenceslas

JOHN MASON NEALE

ENGLISH

Moderately

1. Good King Wen - ces - las looked out On the Feast of Steph - en,
2. "Hith - er, page, and stand by me, If thou know'st it, tell - ing,
3. "Bring me flesh, and bring me wine, Bring me pine - logs hith - er;

When the snow lay round a - bout, Deep and crisp and ev - en;
Yon - der peas - ant, who is he? Where and what his dwell - ing?"
Thou and I will see him dine When we bear them thith - er."

Bright - ly shone the moon that night, Tho' the frost was cru - el,
"Sire, he lives a good league hence, Un - der - neath the moun - tain;
Page and mon - arch, forth they went, Forth they went to - geth - er;

poco piu lento
When a poor man came in sight, Gath - ring win - ter fu - el.
Right a - gainst the for - est fence, By Saint Ag - nes' foun - tain."
Through the rude wind's wild la - ment And the bit - ter weath - er.

4. "Sire, the night is darker now,
And the wind blows stronger;
Fails my heart, I know not how
I can go no longer."
"Mark my footsteps, my good page;
Tread thou in them boldly:
Thou shalt find the winter's rage
Freeze thy blood less coldly."

5. In his master's steps he trod,
Where the snow lay dinted;
Heat was in the very sod
Which the saint had printed;
Therefore, Christian men, be sure,
Wealth or rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor,
Shall yourselves find blessing.