

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1864.

His wife and son died within the year; Longfellow was in Washington DC for Christmas of 1863, the Civil War cannons across the river sounding day and night. In his despair and sorrow and grief he penned these words. The last two verses of the poem were omitted in making it into a Christmas hymn.

I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head
'There is no peace on earth,' I said,
'For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.'

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men.'

Till ringing, singing on its way
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound the carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn, the households born
Of peace on earth, good will to men.