



Jerusalem the Golden

Text: Bernard of Morlaix (12th century)

Tune: Alexander Ewing (1830-1895)

As we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, our thoughts turn not only to our loved ones who are now at rest with the Lord, but also to that heavenly country which we all await. This theme begins at All Saints and will be a part of our thought the next three weeks as we prepare for the close of the Church Year. As we contemplate heaven, we grow increasingly dissatisfied with life in this world. We realize that this place is not our true home, and long to be separated from this dying world. We await the “sweet and blessed country, the home of God’s elect” and pray that the Lord would bring us to it in His good time and pleasure.

One excellent hymn (really an extended poem which we have turned into a number of hymns) on this topic was given to the Church by Bernard of Morlaix (or Cluny; he is known by both titles). Though he was an Englishman by lineage, very little is known about him. He was born in Morlaix, Bretagne, France early in the 12th century. Nothing is known of his life, except that he entered the Abbey of Cluny while Peter the Venerable was Abbott (1122-1156). As far as we know, he spent his entire life there, and likely died there, though the exact date is unknown.

While he was at the Abbey of Cluny, it was at its zenith of wealth and fame. Its buildings, especially its church (which was unequalled by any in France), were quite luxurious. Its church was well known for its elaborate ritual. With over 1,000 monks in residence—more than the population of most towns at that time—large buildings had to be erected just to house them. It took 40 farms to produce enough food for everyone.



It was in this setting that Bernard set about his work of writing. Several of his sermons, including a theological treatise, “Dialogue on the Trinity” are still extant. However, his greatest work was *De Contemptu Mundi*, “On Contempt of the World.” This poem was 3,000 lines long. In it he attacks the corruption which was taking hold in the Church. No one was spared—priests, nuns, bishops, monks, even the heads of the Church in Rome were confronted for their shortcomings. From this lamentation comes two main themes: the temporary nature of all earthly pleasures and the permanency of spiritual joys. Several sections of this poem have been turned into hymns:

- ✘ “The World is Very Evil,” *The Lutheran Hymnal* #605 (This hymn is taken from the poem’s opening lines)
 - ✘ “Brief Life is Here Our Portion,” *The Lutheran Hymnal* #448.
 - ✘ “Jerusalem the Golden,” *The Lutheran Hymnal* #613
 - ✘ “For Thee, O Dear, Dear Country,” *The Lutheran Hymnal* #614
- Though in the hymnal each hymn ends with the same stanza (“O sweet and blessed country...”), this text only appears once in the Latin original. Its repetition was a decision on the part of the translator, John Mason Neale, to keep the hope of heaven awake in the minds and hearts of the singer.

“Jerusalem the Golden” is perhaps one of the best hymns to come from the larger poem. In it we sing of the beauties of heaven. We who wait on earth “oppressed” by sin contemplate the “radiancy of glory” and “bliss beyond compare” that await us (st. 1). Though our songs of joy may be labored here, there the halls of heaven ring with the songs of angels and those who have already attained the end of faith. They sing because the Prince, Jesus Christ, is ever with them. They are released from care, feast with the Lord, and are forever “clad in robes of white” (st. 3). We await that “sweet and blessed country” and pray that in mercy Jesus would bring us “to that dear land of rest” so that we may join in praise of Jesus Christ, “God the Father, and Spirit ever blest” (st. 4).

