

Luke 2:8-20

Christmas Day 2017

Earth's reply

As we read the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel, we might notice that there is a whole lot of praising going on. So, we find an old man called Zechariah who is told that his aged and barren wife Elizabeth is going to have a baby, and in no time he is bursting into a poem of praise. And Mary, a young woman, still a virgin, is told that she will conceive and give birth and she likewise is immediately inspired to voice an exclamation of praise to God – it's called the Magnificat. Then we move onto our reading this morning and we note two incidents of praise and worship. The first involves angels, the angelic host who appear in Bethlehem's fields, surprising the shepherds and who, we are told, praise God, saying:

'Glory to God in the highest heaven',
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

More praise. More worship, this time sounding from heaven. But that is not all – and we need to notice carefully what happens next. The shepherds go with haste to find the baby whose birth has been announced. Heaven only knows how they found him – they were only told that he would be lying in a manger and there must have been a few of them in Bethlehem, but find him they did. And they speak of what they had been told about the baby – and then notice what happens next. Yes, you guessed it: we are told that 'they returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen...'

So it is that in this passage you see that there are two instances of praise and worship. The first comes from heaven, from the angelic host, the angels proclaiming the good news from on high. But then the story ends with the shepherds, replying to that, responding to the worship from above with their earthly praise from below. There is worship from heaven and it is met with worship from earth. It's almost like a call and response: angels cry, 'glory to God in the highest heaven' and then shepherds respond, glorifying and praising God in reply. And in between the two, what has happened? Well, the shepherds have met Jesus.

I want to suggest to you that in this incident, this call and response, we see the basic pattern of the Christian life, the life of the disciple of Jesus. We

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see it, of course, in Jesus' ministry, when Jesus calls disciples and they respond by following him. But in fact this call and response pattern goes much deeper than that. In fact, go right back to the opening chapter of the Bible, to Genesis 1, where we read that 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...' and God says, 'let there be light...' And immediately there comes the response, 'and there was light'. And that is how that opening chapter of Genesis is patterned as the creation unfolds, 'let there be...' - and there was...! Heaven calls and earth responds, springing into being.

We find something of this same call and response pattern in the New Testament. John's Gospel begins with that sublime passage in which Jesus is described as 'the Word', God's Word spoken to us. In Jesus God's Word becomes flesh, addressing us, calling us. One of the other books in the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews, begins in similar vein. 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son...' But when God speaks to us a response is awaited. God summons... we reply. And I suppose that Christmas is a good day to consider what response we are making to God, to God's call, to God's Word addressed to us in Jesus Christ. There is that lovely Christmas carol that contains the lines,

'Heaven sings alleluia
Alleluia the earth replies'

That is the story of that first Christmas night in Bethlehem, and when we read of those shepherds who found the baby and returned glorifying and praising God, we might search our hearts for our reply to God. This could even be a good occasion for a bit of emotional manipulation: 'what is *your* response?' Are you like those shepherds?

Well, there is actually something much better to say than that. The good news, the Gospel is that Jesus has made that response, a perfect response to God's love and God's grace and God's call. He's done it for us. You see, Jesus comes from God. He is God's Word addressed to us. But he is also our response to God. In the person that little baby became we see a life of total obedience and worship. In his deep love for God and for others, in his prayer and his worship, he offered himself to God, and that took him all the way to the cross. That was earth's reply. And now he comes alongside us and says, 'Come with me. Walk with me. God waits for your reply, but you do not do this alone.

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I have trod this path before you, I am the Way, and with me the yoke is easy and the burden is light.'

Christmas speaks of heaven addressing earth - in the song of the angels, and in the Word becoming flesh in the cradle. And Christmas speaks of earth's reply - in the song of the shepherds. And Christmas awaits our response too. The good news is that the life of the disciple is a sharing in the response Jesus has already made for us. We draw strength from him as with him we join in earth's reply. Amen.