

Luke 1:8-20

Christmas Eve 2018

Glory and peace

It came upon the midnight clear – as the shepherds out in the field in the cold chill of the night witnessed something extraordinary. And tonight you and I are taken back to those fields in our imaginations and we are invited to share with them in what they saw and heard: a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying:

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours.’

And that is the strapline that is associated with Christmas, the phrase that is reproduced on any number of Christmas cards: ‘glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth...’ And I don’t think we have much trouble relating to the second part of that proclamation: ‘peace on earth...’. That resonates with us. At the end of another year when the world has been convulsed with conflict and war we can echo that part of the angels song with a heartfelt prayer: ‘Yes - please God, peace on earth!’ Please God, peace in Syria; please God, peace in the middle East...; please God, peace in Yemen’, and so on. Indeed in our secular age this is pretty central to what Christmas has come to stand for: the longing for peace on earth. And that is all very well, but what about the other part of the angels’ proclamation: ‘Glory to God in highest heaven...’ What is that all about? Can we just bracket that and miss it out? Can we have ‘peace on earth’ without ‘glory to God’? And what do we mean by the glory of God anyway?

Well thinking about this, I was taken back to our Old Testament reading tonight which I had never connected before with the Christmas story, but which I think fits rather nicely. It’s a passage attributed to a prophet called Isaiah who lived about 700 years before Christ, and in the book that bears his name we read how one day he went into the temple: the great, magnificent temple of Jerusalem. And on entering the temple he had a vision of God – high and exalted on his throne, with the hem of his robe filling the space. And around God there stood the heavenly host praising God and singing,

‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts,
the whole earth is full of his glory.’

And we are told that the foundations of the temple shook and the entire vast edifice wobbled and was filled with smoke! And we are told that Isaiah is undone – overwhelmed by what he has seen and heard. There is the glory of God for you; majesty, exaltation, smoke and the shaking of foundations – the very weight and fullness of God.

Well, leave that scene now and return to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem. Come away from the heavenly host serenading in the temple, and come back to this heavenly host that appeared to the shepherds in the fields by night. And follow their directions to where the glory of God is to be found now: not in the grand surroundings of a temple, not in some magnificent architectural wonder – but in a manger. Find here the glory of God not in smoke but in the animal breath and the smell of a stable. Find here the glory of God embodied not in some exalted figure above and beyond but in a baby: the fullness of God in a tiny new-born baby at his mother’s breast.

Well, all this takes us back to where we started, to that other part of the angel’s message: ‘peace on earth’. And there is something here that we need to know. This message from the heavenly host is not as innocent as it sounds and let me tell you why. At the time when Jesus was born, there were certain phrases that were associated with Caesar Augustus, who was Roman Emperor at the time. So Augustus was known as ‘Lord’. And many inscriptions on altars around the empire referred to him as ‘saviour of the world’; and one such inscription declares that Augustus’ birthday ‘marked the beginning of the good news through him for the world.’ And Augustus’ rule was regarded as a reign of peace: people spoke of the ‘*pax Augusta*’, though of course it came at the point of a sword. So do you see what the angel and the heavenly host in our reading are doing? They’re taking these imperial titles and phrases that are associated with Augustus - ‘Lord’, ‘saviour’, ‘good news’, ‘peace’ – and applying them to the baby in Bethlehem. The angels are stealing Augustus’ titles and applying them to Jesus! And in so doing the rule of the baby of Bethlehem is subverting the rule of Augustus, for while the rule of the emperor carries the weight of Rome, the rule of the baby in the manger comes with the full weight of the glory of God. And Rome is no match for that. No wonder they ended up crucifying him.

The glory of God – embodied in this tiny baby; and real, true peace on earth. The fact is, you can’t have one without the other. They go together, inseparable. And so, as we sang earlier:

For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophet bards foretold,
when, with the ever-circling years,
still dawns the Age of Gold,
when peace shall overall the earth
its ancient splendours fling,
and all the world give back the song
which now the angels sing. Amen.