

GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO

*Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men.*

*Gloria in Excelsis Deo
et in terra pax himnibus bona voluntas.*

Of the four canticles which surround our Lord's birth which are included in the opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke, this one, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, comes from the highest of sources. The *Benedictus* comes from Zachariah, father of John the Baptist. The *Nunc Dimittis* comes from old Simeon, pious soul awaiting the Messiah. The *Magnificat*, of course, is from the lips of the Blessed Virgin Mary, closer than any other to the wondrous event. The *Gloria in Excelsis*, however, came from no human lips at all but was sung by the tongues of angels.

The *Gloria* is also the most succinct of the canticles. The *Magnificat* traces the contours of God's grace in four substantial strophes, as does the *Benedictus*, part devoted to the coming Messiah, part to his forerunner. The *Nunc Dimittis* is much shorter, expressing the saint's readiness to depart this life now that he has seen the Lord's salvation. But the *Gloria in Excelsis* is the shortest of all. Although it is expanded and amplified in the form we use at Mass (sung now on Christmas Day for the first time since before Advent) the true *Gloria* that filled the heavens on that night of nights had just two lines, traditionally rendered as we read,

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men.

I.

To understand the full significance of the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, we have to look at the context. It was one angel, described simply as "the angel of the Lord," that appeared to the shepherds initially. Was it the same angel, Gabriel, that was sent first to Zachariah to announce that aged Elizabeth would give birth to the forerunner of the Messiah, and then later appeared to Mary at the annunciation? We might assume that it was Gabriel, since those two announcements set the stage for the birth the angel announced to the shepherds that night in the hills, but there, by contrast, he is not named. The name, Gabriel, means 'God is mighty,' and God's power was

critical to the two marvelous conceptions that he announced: to barren Elizabeth and to the virgin Mary. But here at the announcement of Jesus' birth the focus is not on God's power but on the good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. The word angel means 'messenger,' and here no further name is needed. The angel of the Lord is the messenger of the Lord, as the shepherds recognized, for after the angels departed they said to one another, "Let us go and see this thing which *the Lord* has made known unto us." Thus the focus is not on the mightiness of the Lord but on the message of the Lord, on the manifestation of the Lord, this thing he had made known.

The *angel of the Lord* appeared to them and the *glory of the Lord* shown round about them. The Roman Catholic scholar, Raymond Brown notes that, "The glory of the Lord is a feature of theophanies [appearances of God], especially those associated with the overshadowing of the Tabernacle and the Temple."¹ Remember Isaiah in the Temple when he saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and before him stood the seraphim (which were a type of angel) who called to one another,

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts;
The whole earth is full of his glory.
(Isa. 6:3)

That canticle which the cherubim sang at the call of Isaiah to be a prophet of the coming of the Lord finds its greater counterpart in the canticle, *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, sung by the multitude of the heavenly hosts on the night the promised Saviour was born.

II.

"Glory to God in the highest," they sang, for that birth that day in the city of David of the Saviour which is Christ the Lord was the cause for the highest praise of God, for that hymn of glory embraced the fullness of the love and grace of God and his plan for our redemption through his Son by the Holy Spirit. It is in a sense in the *Gloria in Excelsis* that we join every time we say or sing the *Gloria Patri*: "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost," summing up in those few words the whole drama of redemption that is set forth more fully in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. It is the beginning of that drama of redemption that the angels hymned that night.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), p. 426.

“Glory to God in the highest.” All the canticles began with the praise of God. Zechariah’s canticle began, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,” Mary’s began, “My soul doth magnify the Lord,” the angels’, “Glory to God in the highest,” . . . and when blessed St. John peered into the future in the Book of the Revelation he saw cherubim singing, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty” (Rev. 4:8) and the four and twenty elders answering, “Worthy art thou, O Lord our God to receive glory and honor and praise” (4:11). The canticle sung to Isaiah as a promise and hymned by the angels on the night of our Lord’s birth will fill the heaven of heavens at the end of time when his redemptive work is finally done.

III.

“Glory to God in the highest,” sang the heavenly hosts, “and on earth peace.” The birth of our Lord is the cause for the glorifying of God in the highest heaven and the bringing of peace to the earth. The early ascetic, John the Monk, wrote,

Heaven and earth are united today, for Christ is born! Today God has come upon earth, and humankind gone up to heaven. Today, for the sake of humankind, the invisible one is seen in the flesh. Therefore let us glorify him and cry aloud: glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace bestowed by your coming, Savior: glory to you!²

“On earth peace”: peace for the disquiet deep within the human breast, peace between those whose animosity had led only to conflict and war, peace among men who simply ignore one another to death, peace among men and peace with God—all would be accomplished through the words and deeds of the one born this day.

But peace to whom in particular? The old translation, “And on earth peace, goodwill toward men,” seemed to suggest a panacea, a universal, unqualified peace, such, as is obvious to all, did not come. The verse should be translated rather as “peace to those with whom God is well-pleased.” God’s grace and peace require a response. God did not impose the birth of his Son on Mary. He approached her knowing that she was full of grace, that her heart was prepared, and then he waited for her consent, “Be it unto me according to thy word.” The message of the birth of the Savior is, as the angel said, “Good tidings which shall be to all people.” The word has gone out through all the world, but only those who have ears to hear will hear. The seed is cast far and wide but it often falls on stony or shallow ground where it can take no root and bear no fruit. The tragedy that we hear each week in the Last Gospel: “He was in the

² Cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament III Luke*, ed. by Arthur A. Just, Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 41.

world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not” (John 1:10-11), is played out before us every day, perhaps in our own hearts. God’s message of grace is there. Christ the Savior is born, has died and is risen for our redemption. It remains always a question of what we do with it, of what we do with him. The joy is that St. John goes on, “But to as many as received him, to them gave he the power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (1:12).

IV.

We said that the words of the cherubim to Isaiah, the *Trisagion*,

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts;
The whole earth if full of his glory.
(Isa. 6:3)

were a foreshadowing of the canticle of the angels. There is another canticle recorded toward the end of St. Luke’s Gospel that seems an echo of it. At the scene of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, Luke records, “And when [Jesus] was come nigh, even now at the descent of the mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying,

Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord:
Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest.
(Luke 19:37-38)

It seems almost as if the canticle of the multitude of angels is now taken up on the lips of a multitude of the disciples. They are now beginning to see the great plan of salvation come about. Oh, it is still a long time from the triumphal entry to the end of the ages where St. John heard the canticles of heaven. We on this side of heaven take up the canticle of the angels only by faith, for we do not see its full outworking, but by faith we who know the Saviour born as on this day in the city of David can still sing with all our hearts of that which already is coming about in the world:

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.
(R.S.V.)