

HEAVEN AND EARTH ARE UNITED

Isaiah 62. 6-12

Titus 3. 4-7

Luke 2. 8-20

I speak to you in the name of the † Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours’ (Lk 2. 14).

Heaven and earth. I have often been struck by the contrast between heaven and earth in the Christmas story as it is related in St Luke’s Gospel.

Our insight into heaven comes from the strange and mysterious revelation to the Bethlehem shepherds. This revelation was both mystical and terrifying for them. When the angel appeared to them, we are told that ‘the glory of the Lord shone around them’. There the shepherds were, visited by an angel of God; and he was accompanied by nothing less than an emanation of the presence of God himself. What is the ‘glory of the Lord’? It is not easy to define, but one definition would be ‘the infinite beauty and greatness of God’s manifold perfections’. In the Old Testament, we find other instances of God revealing his glory. He did so, for example, in a cloud on Mount Sinai, before he invited Moses to come and receive the tablets of the Ten Commandments;¹ and God also placed his glory in the tabernacle, that portable dwelling place that was constructed for him once the Israelites had fled from Egypt and were travelling to Canaan.²

This manifestation of God’s presence from heaven before the shepherds occurred for a reason, of course. It happened because good news was being announced to the

¹ Cf. Ex 24. 16-18.

² Cf. Lev 16. 2.

whole world. In fact, to call it ‘good news’ is an understatement. It was the *very best* news, tidings of great joy for all the people of the earth. This news was news of a birth; but not just any old birth. It was news of the birth of the Christ, the anointed One, the one who would fulfil the destiny of Israel. When the angel announces the good news to the shepherds, he tells them, ‘to you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Messiah-Lord’ (as the literal translation states, 2. 11). When the shepherds heard these words, they had good reason to stop abruptly in their tracks; because for the Jews, this title of ‘Lord’ was so sacrosanct and holy that human beings dared not pronounce it. In no uncertain terms, the angel was telling them that God himself had come to earth.

And as if this terrifying and utterly bright manifestation from heaven were not enough, suddenly the skies were filled with rapture as a celestial chorus appeared. The angelic host sang a new song of praise and glory to God, in the very highest heaven; and they prayed that peace would enfold the world, because God had looked with favour on the human race. Can you imagine being in the very presence of such a heavenly choir, with voices so numerous that it is impossible to count them? What a ‘glorious’ sight that must have been! And imagine sound of the music!

So much for heaven.

Back on earth, the scene was very different. This birth, which was and *still is* such excellent news for the world, was actually a birth in transit. Whatever difficulties historians might find in verifying St Luke’s account of a Roman census requiring all males to return to their ancestral homes, the evangelist paints a poignant picture of a young couple, far from home, and in crisis. We refer fondly in our nativity plays to the fact that there was ‘no room in the inn’; but it points in actual fact to a real human dilemma. In our thoughts and hearts, the words ‘she laid him in a manger’ may spark pathos; but we tend often to forget that Mary acted in desperation. She

had no other choice. Becoming a parent is stressful enough in the best of conditions; and the description of the birth of our Lord suggests the very worst of conditions. The Holy Family knew what it was to be poor; and they knew what it was to feel excluded from others.

That situation continued until a gang of trembling shepherds from the fields arrived with news of celestial fireworks on the hills. And what a contrast there was! Here the shepherds were, describing how they had seen the angel of the Lord and the massed ranks of the angelic chorus; how they had heard the angel say the ‘L’ word in their very hearing; and there, before the shepherds, were the sight and sounds of a new-born infant in a cattle trough, with a mother having just experienced the trauma and pain of child-birth. There wasn’t even a bed, or even the cheapest Bethlehem B&B, to give a bit of dignity or comfort to the scene. ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’³ In the place of angelic words, the shepherds heard the crying of a baby who was weak, helpless, hungry and distressed.

How can this be?

But let me return to heaven. The song of the chorus of angels was ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven’. *Gloria in excelsis Deo*: literally, Glory to God in the highest places. It seems that there are gradations in the heavenly places. You will remember that on the occasion of the dedication of the Temple, King Solomon prayed to God: ‘Even heaven, and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built!’⁴ ‘Highest heaven’ is of course a figure of speech, used to get across the idea of the ultimate, the superlative, the very highest and holiest place. There is nowhere higher; indicating that here something ultimate, final and all-embracing is going on.

³ Cf. Mt 8. 20.

⁴ Cf. 2 Chr 6. 18.

And then back to earth, and Luke's poignant phrase, 'she wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for him in the inn' (2. 7). Three times, St Luke mentions the sign of the manger: the reference I have just quoted from verse 7, then in the words of the angel of the Lord, 'you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger' (2. 12), and then when the shepherds arrived, 'they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger' (2. 16). While there is no mention of any animals, the Messiah-Lord is laid in a feeding trough. From highest heaven to the lowest place. Messiah-Lord is put, one might say, put down, into the place of the animals. The Genesis story ranks the ordering of creation and tells us that human beings are of greater dignity than the animals, birds and reptiles. Of those things which possess the breath of life, therefore, symbolically Messiah-Lord takes the lowest place. From highest heaven to a manger.

And so symbolically, all creation is encompassed by this mysterious birth. In the Book of Job, we are told that at the first creation, the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy.⁵ Here in the heavens, the heavenly beings sing again, as creation itself is re-dignified by a new saving act of divine creativity. And of course for St Luke, all this is a sign of the universality of salvation. Height and depth, and breadth; this is good news for *all people*, glory in heaven *and* peace on earth. Nowhere and no-one is excluded. The birth of the Christ-child is an act of re-creation.

So far in this talk, I have contrasted heaven and earth. But my final point is to show that in a very real way, in the birth of Messiah-Lord, heaven and earth come together. The clue is once more in the song of the angels.

⁵ Cf. Job 38. 7.

It has been pointed out that verse 14 of our gospel passage:

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

is actually a *couplet*. The sense of the phrase is not so much ‘glory up there, and peace down here.’ Both glory *and* peace come from heaven to earth in the birth of Messiah-Lord. The glory of the Lord shone on Bethlehem hills as a sign that the glory of the Lord was laid in a manger. For here, Luke hints at the deeply mysterious, even terrifying true message of Christmas. Messiah-Lord, the Son of God (to use a title from the Annunciation story) is born among us, as a babe lying in a manger.

This true message must be the heart of our worship today. By the intervention of the Spirit of God, Christ was made man. As the preface for Christmas Day in the *Book of Common Prayer* reminds us, ‘by the operation of the Holy Ghost, (he) was made very man of the substance of the Virgin Mary his mother’. Or as the words of a medieval carol put it, in the womb of Mary, ‘dwelt heaven and earth in little space’.

O, magnum Mysterium. O, how great a mystery. Heaven and earth are contrasted and united, and there is hope for the world. O come, let us adore him, the Saviour, our Messiah-Lord.

Amen.