

GLORY TO GOD

Luke 1:1-20

If we are looking for a Christmas message, I really think it would be impertinent to try to better that of God's messengers, the angels. They said "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours." (Luke 2:14)

Many, many Christmas cards bear messages of peace, and quite a few will trumpet the words "Glory to God." The sentiments are everywhere at this time of the year. They are part of the positive feeling of Christmas. Not many cards that I have seen combine the two thoughts, though. Not many say "Glory to God and peace on earth", but really the two things go together. Peace on earth comes only when God is given glory, by all.

Glory. It's not something that we often consider. We might see a particularly good sunrise or sunset, a particularly spectacular view and say "Isn't that glorious?" But glory as a thing in itself isn't something which often crosses the radar of our minds. Perhaps the nearest we get to it in worldly terms is like something which happened this past year.

This summer many of us were gripped watching the Olympic Games. Morning by morning we got up to hear news that in what was our night the British team had won yet more medals. In fact it happened so often, that my daughter asked if no other countries were winning anything. I had to assure her that there were other sports going on that we didn't hear so much about, because Britain wasn't winning in them, but the countries which were would be getting that news. Be that as it may, the British team did very well, and it raised people's spirits and made many people proud: not only those who knew the athletes personally. Do you remember the pictures which we saw after the games were over and the athletes came home? How they were met at the airport by cheering crowds? How some of them were given tours of their home towns in open-topped busses? How they were courted on television? How just a couple of weeks ago Chris Hoy was voted Sports Personality of the year? That is glory. That is giving people glory. Giving honour for what someone is, what someone has achieved, and finding ways to show it.

Giving people open-topped bus tours or the freedom of a city is one way of ascribing glory. But it is not always appropriate. When a child in primary school has a birthday, for one day they will be given glory by the school, but not an open-topped bus tour! They may be given a special hat or sash or badge to wear: it may be special privileges, or treats.

Glory and honour are closely related. In ancient times, perhaps more so than now, honour was given to the ruler, the King; it was given not only in outward show, but also, in fact chiefly, by the people doing what he ordained. They gave glory to their ruler by keeping his laws, paying their taxes, living as he instructed them. Of course, to merit such honour the ruler also had certain responsibilities to which he must be faithful.

When the angels sang Glory to God, they were giving him glory, giving him honour in the best way possible for them. Angels are God's messengers: they exist to give him praise and to do his will, and by bringing the good news to earth they were doing both. If we are to give glory to God, then what will it mean? For it will mean more than just saying or singing the words. The words are a good starter, a good reminder of what we should be about, but the words are not the deed. Just like the people of old, just like the angels, we give glory to God when we do what he has

ordained for us.

What that is, is not puzzling, because the angels told us that as well. The words “Glory to God and peace on earth” are not simply a statement, they are also an instruction. If we are to give God glory, honour, respect, then what he wants to see us doing is making peace on earth.

Peace on earth. When God sent Jesus to us he was making peace between heaven and earth. He was providing a way whereby he could forgive us the wrong we do and welcome us into his family, so that we never need to fear him, or his purposes for us in this world or the next. And that is the amazing good news that we celebrate this night. Peace between heaven and earth, between God and the people he has made. This is the peace that God gives us.

Peace on earth is something different, though. God gives us peace between earth and heaven; but peace on earth is what God asks of us, so that we may give him glory. Too often at Christmas the words of peace are spoken, as though the world were already at peace. But our own observations and common sense tells us that this is not so, and simply saying “Peace on earth” doesn’t make it so. So then what are we celebrating? We are celebrating the concrete evidence of God’s goodwill among us: his Son sent to live with us and die for us and bring us peace with God.

But peace on earth is not something that will happen if we sit back and think God is going to do it despite us. And to live in that way is not to give glory to God. Christmas is a great invitation to celebration, but it is also the day that God sent the angels to tell us how we might give him the glory, how we should live to bring honour to him, how to fulfil the message of the angels.

When God became one of us, in sending Jesus, he took the lowliest way, eschewing the palaces of princes and being born with every disadvantage, to ordinary folk. His love for us was and is so great that he put aside all barriers in his coming. He was showing us how to work and live for peace on this earth that he made. Pride has no place. It is pride that will not let an old hurt die, and refuses to forgive. It is pride that leads to revenge and escalation of conflict. It is pride that prevents the person in the wrong admitting fault and so turning away anger. How often have you heard the child protest - how often have you protested yourself: “It wasn’t my fault!” When all you really mean is that you don’t want to shoulder responsibility.

If we want to give God glory then we are asked to show it in how we live. We must enthrone his principles of humility of love in our lives: principles he acted out in sending his Son to be one of us. Peace on earth begins with peace around the Christmas dinner table, peace in the family gathering. Peace on earth begins with us making a habit of forgiving those close to us who have offended us, rather than holding on to the hurt and cherishing the grudge. That is easier said than done, but that’s what we’re called to.

Peace between factions and nations begins with people making a habit of forgiveness, a habit of making the effort to understand, a habit of not assuming that they are always right. Peace on earth starts with the individual and works its way up through the layers of society.

When we put ourselves out for others, loving our enemies as Jesus told us, and going the extra distance even for those who take advantage of us: then we live lives that glorify God, then we fulfil the message of the angels song, and then we are contributing to peace on earth.

May this Christmas find us prepared to give up the old grudges and start each relationship anew. Then for us all, and for all who come near us, it will truly be a

proper celebration, and a very happy Christmas