

---

# *St. Aidan's* Sermons

Winnipeg, Manitoba

The Rev. Canon Dr. Brett Cane, January 22, 2012

---

*Epiphany 3; 7:45 p.m. Evensong*

---

## ***“Gloria in Excelsis Deo”*** **(Psalm 148:1-6; Colossians 1:15-20) Luke 2:1-15**

### ***Opening Prayer:***

*Lord Jesus, the heavenly Angels heralded your birth with a great chorus of adoration; help us now, by your Holy Spirit, to grasp the impact of that praise and so, too, be moved to worship and give glory to our Father in heaven. Amen.*

### **Introduction**

Tonight we heard a magnificent rendition of Vivaldi's "Gloria in Excelsis" and in this homily we will be looking at the words of this canticle which are based on the verse from Luke 2 we heard read earlier, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests" (Luke 2:14). We will look briefly at how the canticle is used in worship and then at what it tells us about God and then about us.

### **"Gloria in Excelsis" in worship**

The term "canticle" is taken from the Latin for song and has come to be applied to ancient hymns taken directly from the Bible or using expansions of Biblical texts. The names of canticles are taken from the opening word or words in the original language, mainly Latin for us. In traditional Anglican liturgy, the five most frequently used are Te Deum and Benedictus in Morning Prayer and Magnificat and Nunc Dimitis in Evening Prayer and "Gloria in Excelsis" in Holy Communion. What is fascinating is that four of the five are taken from the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel.<sup>12</sup> Gloria in Excelsis is an expansion of verse 14 of Luke 2 and its translation is as follows:

Glory to God in the highest  
and peace to his people on earth.

Lord God, heavenly King,  
Almighty God and Father,  
we worship you, we give you thanks,  
we praise you for your glory.

Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 1: 68-79 (Benedictus); Luke 1:47-55 (Magnificat); Luke 2:29-32 (Nunc Dimitis); Luke 2:14 (Gloria in Excelsis).

Lord God, Lamb of God,  
 you take away the sin of the world:  
 have mercy on us;  
 You are seated at the right hand of the Father:  
 receive our prayer.

For you alone are the Holy One,  
 you alone are the Lord,  
 you alone are the Most High,  
 Jesus Christ,  
 with the Holy Spirit,  
 in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

It was originally a Greek hymn composed on the model of the psalms, and was used during the regular morning service of the Eastern Church as early as the fourth century. It is thus one of the oldest hymns of the Church. It was used in Rome in the next century, but then only on special occasions such as Christmas or for bishops before coming into more general use in the later Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> It was set at the beginning of the Communion service, after a penitential beginning, to open our worship to God. This is where it sits in our modern services and although we do not use it at our 10:00 a.m. service, we follow the spirit of it through singing hymns and songs of praise at that point. Archbishop Cranmer translated it and used in the Book of Common Prayer Communion service, eventually placing it at the very end, as a great peon of praise to God for all he has given us in salvation which we have just celebrated and shared in the Sacrament. This is where it sits for our 8:30 a.m. service.

It begins with the verse from Luke, then expands into praise of the Father, moves into “penitential” adoration<sup>4</sup> of the Son and then back to pure praise of God including the Holy Spirit. Glory is not only the opening word, it is the theme of the whole song; Sue Careless<sup>5</sup> has used the colours of precious metals to help describe it – an overall aura of gold as we join the angels in heaven around the throne of God as in Revelation (4:8, 5:12-13, 7:12, 19:6) – pure white or precious silver for the middle section as we mediate on Christ’s sacrifice for our sins and back again to gold for the closing lines. It truly is one of the great hymns of the church!

### **About God**

As we move on to look at the verse in Luke which lies at the beginning of the canticle and is expanded by it, we begin with God: “Glory to God in the highest.” Before looking at these words, we note that it was sung by “a great company of the heavenly host” (Luke 2:13). Angels figure prominently in Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth – Mary and Zachariah are both visited by angels to set the stage for Jesus’ arrival so important is the news. But here, it is not just one but a whole host – only rarely in the Bible do we see such an array and it is always in the context of God’s glory in heaven (e.g. Daniel 7:9-10 and Revelation – see above). Outside of heaven, we read that the angels rejoice at beginning of creation:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone - while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4-7).

---

<sup>3</sup> With thanks to Sue Careless, *Discovering the Book of Common Prayer. Vol. II.* (Toronto. ON: ABC Publishing, 2006), pgs. 291-292.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 292.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*.

This now happens at the birth of Jesus and these words are purposely echoed in Bishop Philips Brooks' carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem".<sup>6</sup>

For Christ is born of Mary  
 And gathered all above  
 While mortals sleep, the angels keep  
 Their watch of wondering love  
 O morning stars together  
 Proclaim the holy birth  
 And praises sing to God the King  
 And Peace to men on earth.

Here, the only other example of angels praising God outside of heaven, it is also a beginning – but this time, it is the *new* creation which Christ brings. Jesus is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:15). Hebrews refers to this occasion, saying, "When God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him'" (Hebrews 1:6). This is the event the whole of creation has been waiting for - God come to earth as "Immanuel" – God with us as we are told in the Christmas story in Matthew (1:23).

This is why we give glory – glory represents all that is true and magnificent about a person – "She sat there, in all her glory!" This hymn of praise by the angels acknowledges God for all he is and what he does. This praise of God is expanded in the "Gloria in Excelsis" as it goes on to say:

Lord God, heavenly King,  
 Almighty God and Father,  
 we worship you, we give you thanks,  
 we praise you for your glory.

We can't express more clearly our great joy and thanksgiving that God has revealed his love for us by coming to us in Jesus.

## About Us

However, one of the great reasons we praise God is for what he came to do for us in Jesus which we see through the second half of verse 14 in Luke 2: "On earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." This is not to be translated "Peace to those of goodwill" but to those who will receive that peace – God's people. Jesus is the means through which we are given peace and this is why we give glory to God. William Barclay<sup>7</sup> points out that the Shepherds keeping watch were special shepherds. Bethlehem is very close to Jerusalem and was the location where the flocks from which the temple sacrifices were chosen were kept. He says, "It is a lovely thought that the shepherds who looked after the Temple lambs were the first to see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."<sup>8</sup> This is the meaning of the personal name the baby is given by the angel in Matthew 1:21: "You are to give him the name Jesus (Jeshua – meaning 'God saves') because he will save his people from their sins." The baby in the manger is to be saviour on the cross giving his life for our forgiveness.

This is clearly revealed in the middle section of our canticle as it expands on this:

Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,  
 Lord God, Lamb of God,

<sup>6</sup> Words: Bishop Phillips Brooks, Lewis H. Redner.

<sup>7</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke*. Rev. Ed. (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), pg. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid..

you take away the sin of the world:  
 have mercy on us;  
 You are seated at the right hand of the Father:  
 receive our prayer.

Through this baby heralded by the angels we receive peace with God - the forgiveness of our sins.

The canticle then moves on to the final climax of praise:

For you alone are the Holy One,  
 you alone are the Lord,  
 you alone are the Most High,  
 Jesus Christ,  
 with the Holy Spirit,  
 in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

The baby in the manger is no ordinary human. Only God himself, come as human, could do this great deed for us – he is indeed “the Lord and the Most High” who has come to invite us to receive his peace and join the eternal fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

“Gloria in Excelsis” has taken the verse from which it sprung and expanded its true meaning in a cascade of praise. No wonder the great musicians down through the ages have wanted to set its words to magnificent music to give glory to the mighty and loving God who has come to save us and give us his peace. To God be the glory!