

**Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> December 2018**  
**Christmas Day (C)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Isaiah 9.2-7**  
**NT: Titus 2.11-14**  
**G: Luke 2.1-14**

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

Some one hundred and twenty five years after the birth of Jesus Christ, not long before he was martyred an elderly man named Telesphorus, sat in a Roman catacomb and dictated an instruction to his assistant. His voice was frail- he had for many years been a hermit and was unaccustomed to public speaking, however the politics of the Church were as unusual then as now and somehow he had ended up as Bishop of Rome. From his cracked and thin lips came the words in his native Greek- Δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ, 'Glory to God in the highest'- these words, the words of the angels were, on his instruction, to be sung at clandestine services across the city, as the small and persecuted groups of Christians met to worship the babe of Bethlehem.

Some one thousand one hundred and forty four years after the birth of Jesus Christ, the great and the good of the Kingdom of France gathered in the newly completed basilica of St Denis, just outside Paris, rebuilt in the Gothic style by the Abbot, Abbe Suger. They came to see a building many had said was impossible- arched windows let in hitherto unseen rays of light and the soaring arches made the grubby group of medievals really believe that their prayers were one with those of Heaven. As King Louis VII and Suger looked on, the choir sang 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo'- Glory to God in the Highest, allowing their prayers and hopes to soar into the ethereal light, up, up unto the ascended babe of Bethlehem.

Some one thousand six hundred and sixty six years after the birth of Jesus Christ, the Reverend William Mompesson, Rector of the small Derbyshire village of Eyam, celebrated the Holy Communion on Easter Day according to the rite of the Book of Common Prayer. There was not a large congregation- the village had voluntarily quarantined itself during an outbreak of bubonic plague, leading to the deaths of over three quarters of its inhabitants, including the Rector's own wife Catherine. As he intoned 'Glory be to God on high' at the very end of the Communion service he looked out on his tiny, sickly congregation and commended to the care of the babe of Bethlehem the remains of a world that seemed unlikely ever to waken from the dark sleep of death again.

Some one thousand eight hundred and sixty one years after the birth of Jesus Christ, in the swamps of Southern Louisiana, a group of escaped slaves huddled together for warmth and in fear. As the shouts of the pursuing Confederate troops begin to sound in the distance, one man begins, quietly, to sing. 'Glory, Glory, Hallelujah' and so the hope of the freedom promised by the babe of Bethlehem is implanted in troubled and frightened hearts once more.

A matter of moments after the birth of Jesus Christ, shepherds, abiding in the fields, were received the shock of their sheep tending lives. For above and beside and all around them were the heavenly host- those whose whole purpose is to sing the praise of God, beings from beyond the realms of glory come down to an unassuming hillside in such a world as this one. Yet, just beyond that hillside a new realm of glory had been opened as God incarnate was born. And it is that realm of glory, the glory vested in the babe of Bethlehem that each of those moments where glory was sung reflect.

Each time we sing of glory we give back that song sung by the angels that very night, this very morning. Each time those figures in history sang glory, in hope or in celebration or in

the depths of despair, they echoed back that song sung on that night. For all of those, hope, glory, despair, are wrapped up in the birth of the babe of Bethlehem- are wrapped up in the life of Jesus for his life is wrapped up in our lives, in the life of earth. He was born, true, but he lived and suffered and died and, most importantly, rose again too. But by that birth he imbued our living and dying, and the living and dying of all those characters across history with that of which the angels sang- with glory.

They, we, are the people who have walked, who so often continue to walk, in darkness of whom Isaiah speaks. And the echo of that glory on the hillside above Bethlehem is that light that great light which, though our desire or ability to see it has waxed and waned, has remained, through the centuries, shining- giving hope; hope of light in darkness, hope of life in death, hope, above all, of the transformation of our frail humanity into the eternal life of Heaven, just as, in reverse, the one who was pre-existent before Creation, begotten of His father became frail and human. Hope, in short, of glory.

Some two thousand and eighteen years since the birth of Jesus Christ we have sat, here in Liverpool, and heard the song of the angels, the glory that they proclaimed. The world now is as full of hopes and fears as it was in the time of Pope Telesphorus, Abbe Sugar, the Mompessons, the escaped slaves of Louisiana, or of the shepherds keeping watch by night. The world now is in as much need of hearing that song of glory as it ever was. The question that the echoes of that glory put to us across the ages is this- what will we choose to sing to this world today? Will it be songs of our own praise- always popular but increasingly so in an age of rampant individualism. Will it be the songs of ideology- false bars spat by wicked men that we thought had been left in the past but whose tune inexorably strikes up again. Will it be the most beguiling song of all- that faint whistle of indifference- 'I'm alright jack' set to music as we sit, plump and prosperous, toasting a God we truly believe to be dead.

Or will it be the song of the angels? The echoing song that ties us to those cries of glory throughout the earthly ages, that ties us to those celebrating across the earth this morning, and that ties us, above all, to the unceasing worship of Heaven. Will it be that song of hope, that peace might truly come to this wicked world? Will it be that song of faith, that our corruptible bodies might be, by the fact of a saviour's birth, be reconciled with his heavenly body? Will it be the song of all songs? Will it be the song of glory?

Fr Fergus Butler-Gallie