

Friday December 24, 2010

REALMS OF GLORY

*¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host
praising God and saying,
¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Luke 2:13*

"Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care;

And take us to heaven to live with Thee There. ("Away in a Manger" #365
LSB)

What kinds of recreation will you have this Christmas? I hope you get outside. Maybe you'll do some tobogganing. Maybe you'll have one of those wonderful walks in a winter wonderland. The snow makes the dullness of the season and turns it into reflective light. But after these things are done, maybe you'll sit down and enjoy a movie together, cuddled in blankets with hot chocolate in hand. The most popular movies around take you into a fantasy land. An Avatar DVD was playing on a screen at the mall when I began thinking about this sermon several days ago now. Now that's otherworldly. There were Big Blue creatures rather than the little green men. A little further down the TV sales aisle was the loud colourful "Alice in Wonderland". And for those seeking something a bit more traditional and seasonal there's the Grinch who stole Christmas, where the unique animation type art transports you to a "Whoville" unlike anything seen here. There's the Polar Express where computer generation and traditional art creates an otherworldly picture between dream and reality.

But these otherworldly destinations last only a few minutes compared with eternity. The hot chocolate gives out. Pressing needs of children or spouse requires you to leave your cuddled cocoon. Harsh reality blows in like a front door left open in a mid-winter storm. Fantasy Land departs.

Must it?

A Real Kingdom Comes

Fantasyland might depart but for Christians something better is given in its place. At Christmas we celebrate that the Lord has come, and with Him, the Kingdom of Heaven comes to earth and all the hosts of heaven sing the hymn of Praise: "Glory to God in the Highest and Peace to His People on Earth". To best flesh out the scene we shouldn't too easily pass over the phrase "heavenly hosts". It's not just a whole bunch of angels, although that would be impressive in its own right. It's the heavenly hosts referring to the armies of God. Angels can either be messengers or warriors for the Lord or both. We imagine them at the ready with Michael the Archangel at the command ready to turn over the armies as a Sergeant-Major would to his commander on parade. Clearly the author of our Christmas tale St. Luke sees beyond the flesh of the Babe to see the Son of God assuming that human flesh in all power and glory. What an impressive sight! What we acknowledge as happening in the unseen realm as we sing on a Sunday morning in the Sanctus concerning the God of Sabaoth meaning Lord of hosts, the Shepherds saw with their own eyes. Since it seems so otherworldly making believing in it a challenge, our author Luke even in chapter 2 connects us to the reality of the story.

We don't have a Grinch or a Cheshire Cat but a Caesar Augustus and a King Herod. We might not have a "Whoville", but we have Bethlehem. We don't have a contrived Avatar body but promise of a Glorified human one. We have an otherworldly realm which broke into human history *when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,*⁵ *to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.* (Galatians 4:4-6). Angels from realms of glory announced the coming time, declaring Good News of a Saviour who is the Son of David, a true king bringing to us who still dwell upon the earth a Kingdom of Heaven.

Heaven bursts onto the scene. Imagine even the manly shepherds being afraid? Shepherds fight off wolves and bears. Shepherds fight off those who would steal the flock. Shepherds are used to hearing things go bump in the night. Theirs is a profession which cannot be held by those easily rattled. And not only was the Holy Spirit present as they spoke, but also a convincing tremor of the voice as they recounted their experience to all that would listen so that "they wondered at what the shepherds told them". Imagine untrained and uneducated orators holding the attention of everyone they would meet? It is scene we can imagine when we realize that these men truly had seen through a portal into another world. The glory of the Lord shone all around them. The angels we hear go back up into heaven but the gift from heaven remains on earth. He is Christ the Lord.

A Kingdom as mysterious, and wonderful as her King

We can become excited about this Kingdom because we know who the King is. The angels and the entire heavenly host were worshiping He who is King of Angels. He is Son of God and Son of Man. But he is just a Babe I can hear the critics crying. How can we see anything great in that?

But with this Babe there is a call he has given even before he can speak. Before He Himself speaks in the voice of a man, he has already spoken the Word as the Word before the beginning of time. Remember "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God". Remember the prophets and patriarchs who were sent in His stead. Remember the liturgy of Evening Prayer: "In many and various ways God spoke to His people of old by the prophets".

Yes, he who lay in the manger had issued a call. He who does not now speak had already spoken. He, who does not now speak, spoke through the prophets to say that He would be born of a Virgin. And it was so. He, who does not now speak, spoke through the prophets to say he would be born in Bethlehem. And it was so. In that same prophecy from Micah he reveals his eternal origins and therefore His Divinity. Yet, there he is a babe clearly revealing his helpless humanity. He who does not now speak spoke through the prophets of Old to say "The kings of **Tarshish** and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. (Psalm 72)" They would all worship him. And now it was so. This was a special Babe. He is a king who ushers in a Kingdom and as the "Away in a Manger" carol has us sing,

"Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care;
And take us to heaven to live with Thee There. (#365 LSB)

Unlike all the mythical places that the movies take us to, we know that this one is real. We know it won't fade like the light fades from our television screens the moment we stop watching. As quickly and accurately as he was fulfilling all he set out to do, the Shepherds, the Wise men, Mary and Joseph and all the rest could be assured that he would begin to fulfill all other things also. The appearance of the heavenly host, in itself, spoke of a war that was to be won establishing peace forever even as peace in the hearts of all who would believe had already been set.

They knew he was special from the angelic announcement. They followed the angelic instructions to look for “the sign” and discovered the babe lying just as they had been promised, “wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger”.

It is a real wondrous Kingdom for all people.

It is love that draws people to the Kingdom: A young Virgin; a humble carpenter; shepherds considered by most as lowly having by necessity lived outside the Law; Magi from the East; and all of you present here, as diverse and unique as the fingerprint you bear. All gather around the manger side. Only the Divine Son Of God could gather such a crowd as diverse and unique and across such a span of time.

Quirinius had to issue an edict to compel people to enter the city. And his edict is only powerful over some. It only went to the then known inhabited world which the NIV rightly renders “the whole Roman world”. Christ does not motivate by edicts and force of the Law but rather motivates with the Gospel. Rather than force he draws. By the cross and a message of love and forgiveness He accomplishes all he sets out to do as he Himself says “I draws all men to myself (John 12:32)”. He draws them from every nation tribe and people. He draws them regardless of gender, station and condition. He calls also to those old as Simeon or as young as the boy martyrs of Bethlehem.

Conclusion: A real Wondrous Kingdom for You

He seeks to draw you also this Christmas Eve to manger side. He draws you both with the wondrous and mysterious nature of the tale even as it is rooted in our existing reality. It’s a real story scrutinized by those who were there. It’s a story authenticated by the martyrs who lay down their lives to tell of it. The first martyrs of Christmas were the boys of Bethlehem, the Holy Innocents who Herod murdered. Herod wasn’t fighting a fantasy but a real king, with real magi seeking Him that they might as the Shepherd’s had already “bow down and worship Him”. It is no mere fable which we bow down to this evening. He is the Eternal Son of God. He is the Babe of Bethlehem. He is Jesus Christ Our Lord.

He opens heaven’s Gate. He opens that place beyond fantasy. He draws us in to be with all the dear children in Thy tender care and takes us to heaven to live with Thee there.

Amen.