

Christmas Vigil Mass at 5:00 p.m.

*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*

December 24, 2013/ Cathedral of Saint Paul

Isaiah 62:1-5; Acts of the Apostles 13:16-17, 22-25; Matt. 1:18-25

In the silence of the winter night, as dark though certainly not as cold as tonight, a lonely winter silence was broken by the voice of an angel speaking to the shepherds who, according to ancient tradition, were the innocent ones to whom divinity revealed itself. While the angel spoke to these frightened and astonished men, he was joined by a vast throng of others who cried out “Gloria,” praising in song the wonders of the Lord.

*Gloria in excelsis Deo!* The opening verse is taken from the angels' announcement to the shepherds of the birth of Our Lord (Lk 2:14). This was the jubilant chant sung by the celestial choirs over the silent fields of Bethlehem. These were the words that announced to a world veiled in sleep and sin the birth of Christ, the Word incarnate.

While the *Gloria* was not created for the Mass, it is amongst the most ancient hymns of praise in the Church, and in its present wording is virtually unchanged since the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Reserved initially only for Masses celebrated by a bishop, it later became extended to Masses celebrated by priests on special occasions, and eventually on all Solemnities. Three sections are plainly discernable: (1) the heavenly song of the angels on Christmas night (2) the praise of almighty God and (3) the invoking of Jesus Christ as Savior.

In the depths of the night a voice resounds. The silence of the night is broken only by the heavenly sounds of *Gloria*, much as it has been tonight. In the ancients' minds, the sense of “glory” was far deeper than our modern conception of fame and honor, such as when people speak of an athlete “basking in the glory of victory.” No, it referred to the biblical sense of manifestation of the divine power, the recognition of God by man and the salvation communicated by the risen Christ.

Christ's coming to earth signaled the *beginning* of salvation for mankind. "Glory to God, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests." Could it be that the biblical text is more than a wish, more than a hoped for result? Perhaps this heavenly host is declaring a truth of our faith by proclaiming, "God is first glorified; then we will become people of peace." Jesus Christ is the cause of our peace.

Each time that we gather at Church, we do so primarily to give praise and glory to God, to proclaim the salvation that He wrought through the Father's gift of His own Son. In the darkness of winter, a new light flashes across the world and the Church beholds in wonder and awe the arrival of our salvation, the advent of God's great plan of salvation. "We praise Him; we bless Him; we Adore Him; we glorify Him." [*Laudamus te. Benedicimus te. Adoramus te. Glorificamus te.*]

[These expressions could already be found in the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*, a mid-second century work. Even as the fire was being prepared that would consume his body, this saint cried out:

"For this cause, yea and for all things, I praise Thee, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, through the eternal and heavenly High-priest, Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, through whom with Him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now [and ever] and for the ages to come. Amen." (14:3)]

The sentiments contained in the Gloria are ancient, yet ever new, ever relevant. All of our efforts fall short of the fullness of the Truth, for He is all Truth. Yet, even in our weakness, we try. This is not a hymn about us or our needs, but about Him. We direct our glance wholly to God's glory and His grandeur.

The *Gloria* also invokes peace on earth to those on whom His favor rests. The key question then for all of us tonight: Are we among that number? Does God's favor rest upon us?

We give thanks on account of God's goodness, and believe that when we reach out in humility and truth to embrace our newborn Savior in the manger, our faith helps us see the very reason for our joy. The Father's favor rests upon those who hope in His word, those who trust that His promises to us will be fulfilled.

God has made promises not only to the world, but to you and me, to our families. Our Savior came for each of us and for all of us. Our grateful glance towards God's glory moves naturally tonight onto the Christ-child, in whom the Father's glory was revealed to us. Today, he reaches his arms out in a gesture of invitation, the innocence of which cannot hide its profundity. We rejoice because we have been counted among those upon whom God's favors rests.

In faith and discipleship, we are invited to do the same, beginning in our own homes. Tonight, all of our concerns and problems, disappointments and failures- and even those of the Church we love and for which we are mourning in these difficult days-these all may be placed before the Crib, and laid there to rest, at least for now. For to us a Savior has been born in our midst, and He came to bring light to all the darkness of our lives.

Our mighty God ventured into the night of silence, a reverent silence, a profound simplicity, and he ventured there to find and save us. The Light of Divine Love has come into our world anew. May the joy and happiness of our "Gloria" resound in your hearts forever.