

A Sermon by the Rev. Roger Wm. Smith on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

The words of the Eucharistic liturgy, Part II

The Gloria in excelsis

At the beginning of the service we sing the hymn called the *Gloria in excelsis*—“*Glory to God in the highest...*” We sang it earlier this morning. You might want look it up in your service leaflet, and follow along as we consider the words.

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, 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,

This is an ancient Greek hymn. It was first used in the services of the Eastern Orthodox Churches in the 4th century, and it was introduced into the Roman Mass by Pope Symmachus.... sometime early in the 6th century.

It is a hymn of praise and thanksgiving, and, as such, is a good way to begin the service of the Holy Eucharist, our liturgy of thanksgiving. In the older prayer books the *Gloria* was sung as a thanksgiving *after* Communion.

Now it has been restored to its original location at the opening of the Service. It is an expression of thankfulness for all of God's gifts.

Because of the joyful nature of the hymn it is not sung in Lent. It wouldn't due to be joyful in that somber season! For most of the year, we Anglicans are fun loving Christians, but we try to make up for all of that frivolity by becoming sober and solemn during the 40 days preceding Easter.

First of all consider that word “Glory”. My dictionary defines it as “great honor, praise, or renown.” It is an expression of adoration and thanksgiving offered in worship. As such it has been a term most often found in religious literature. “Glory, glory, hallelujah!” Like so many frequently used words, we might blithely skip over this one without taking thought of what we are saying.

According to St. Luke's Gospel, it was first used on the night Jesus was born. A host of angels from heaven appeared to some shepherds in a nearby field. They put on a spectacular for them by singing “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (Luke 2:14) On this holy night there came a song of Peace and good will toward all people on earth. Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Those angels were not heralding a new era of peace on earth. God knows, if that was what they were promising, they got it wrong. Jesus, himself said, “I have not come to bring peace.” (Mat-

thew 10:34) The peace that the Gloria proclaims is peace between heaven and earth. Up until Jesus appeared on the scene, God was perceived as a fearsome task master, all too eager to afflict punishment on us naughty boys and girls. Like the flood in the days of Noah. But the child born in Bethlehem ushers in an era in which God is revealed as a loving, compassionate, and merciful Father. He is not at war with us, he is the Prince of Peace. Glory, glory, hallelujah! So we begin our celebration of the Eucharist on the same note as the story of Jesus began. And, as the hymn says, for this we worship God and give God thanks.

The second stanza of this hymn reflects those familiar words: *Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy upon us. O Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world have mercy on us.* Lest we become so caught up in the glorification of God, we are at this point reminded that we still fall short of God's hopes for us. We still mess up, so we call for mercy. We know that this mercy is made manifest in the suffering of Jesus on the cross. He is the sacrificial Lamb, offered for the sins of the world. Let's face it, any God that willingly went through all of that pain and humiliation just for us, must be mega merciful... profoundly compassionate.

Well, isn't that what the Eucharist is all about? Isn't it celebrated recalling that God gave us Jesus, his only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to the God and Father of all?

The third and final stanza of this hymn is related to that point in the service when, just before Communion, the priest turns to us and says, "The gifts of God for the people of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving."

You who 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.*"

You see, what is being offered, is far more than a morsel of bread and a sip of sweet wine. Being given into our hands is all of the glory, the mercy, and the majesty of heaven. Glory be to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth.

One is reminded here of the last line of that strange and mysterious Gospel appointed to be read today. (John 10:1-10)

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calling himself the gate, promises that whoever enters by Him will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. In that pasture we are fed on the good news that God is loving, compassionate, and merciful.

And remember the last line of the Good Shepherd, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Glory, glory, Hallelujah!