

Day 19: Angels We Have Heard on High

Dec. 16

*1 Angels we have heard on high,
sweetly singing o'er the plains,
and the mountains in reply
echoing their joyous strains.*

Refrain: ***Gloria in excelsis Deo!***
Gloria in excelsis Deo!

*2 Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be
Which inspire your heavenly song? [Refrain]*

*3 Come to Bethlehem and see
Christ whose birth the angels sing.
Come, adore on bended knee
Christ the Lord, the newborn King. [Refrain]*

*4 See him in a manger laid
whom the choirs of angels praise.
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid,
while our hearts in love we raise. [Refrain]*

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. (Isaiah 55:12)

Angels We Have Heard on High is a French carol dating from the 18th century. The names of the original French author, as well as the music's composer, are unknown. In 1862 a Roman Catholic priest (later to become bishop), James Chadwick wrote English lyrics to the carol that are rather loosely based on the original French text. Chadwick himself came from a prosperous family that owned several large linen mills, yet he eschewed the life of wealth and ease for a higher calling in the church.

Angels We Have Heard on High begins with a declaration of praise rising up from an angelic choir. Their “joyous strains” are quickly echoed back by the very mountains themselves. The brilliance of *Angels We Have Heard on High* is found in the interplay of its music and the words, especially in the chorus. When the chorus is sounded, the angels’ praise to God seems to veritably reverberate from everywhere: “Gloria in excelsis Deo! Gloria in excelsis Deo!” The Latin words mean, “Glory to God in the highest!”

In verse 2, the shepherds have fully joined in praising God. Indeed, they are asked, “What the gladsome tidings be which inspire your heavenly song?” Consider what an amazing alliance has been formed: majestic angelic beings and simple unwashed shepherds – singing the same song. Though shepherding is a familiar profession in the scriptures, it was seldom anyone’s dream job. It was in fact normally left either to servants or to youngest sons. After all, it was hard, monotonous, and lonely work that no shepherd could ever “complete.” Whenever a

family was expecting a new baby, the youngest son always hoped and prayed for a little brother so the young'un can "take my place" and "Hallelujah! I can finally come in out of the cold."

An example from 1 Samuel 16. Samuel was the prophet of the Lord. He had been charged by God to anoint the next king of Israel. It was revealed that the one chosen by the Lord would come from the sons of Jesse. After arriving in Bethlehem, Jesse's hometown, Samuel is shown seven of Jesse's sons, one at a time, beginning with the oldest. But none is found to be suitable. "Are all your sons here?" Samuel pointedly asks his host. The response, "Well, there is one more, but he's the youngest boy. He's out tending sheep." Of course. Youngest sons? They don't count for much. Or do they? (David was the exact one God had chosen to become king.)

Almost a thousand years later out in those same fields surrounding David's city, Bethlehem, simple shepherds – youngest sons and other cast-offs living seemingly meaningless lives – are suddenly given new dignity and a new voice as they join the angelic chorus. "Gloria in excelsis Deo! Gloria in excelsis Deo!" That is the power of the gospel; it transforms even us into active participants in heaven's song.

And so in the third and fourth verses, we who have been on the sidelines, merely observing the drama as it has incorporated ever more into the choir – we too are invited to "come to Bethlehem and see" what the song's all about. And who then can resist it? The same praise that the angels have poured out now "our hearts in love we raise." This is the amazing nature of the good news of Christmas; that peace on earth has been declared. Good will toward all.

One final word about shepherds, this from the Savior himself. The babe of Bethlehem would grow up and one day say of himself "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11), thereby ending the stigma for all "inferior" peoples. How can we not also sing, "Gloria in excelsis Deo! Gloria in excelsis Deo!"

Questions

1. Are there ways in which you have chosen, like Bishop Chadwick, to pursue God's will and ways rather than merely chasing more wealth and comfort?
2. What in the gospel calls to your innermost needs?
3. Who do you know that is among the least, the last, or the lost who needs to hear the song of Christmas this year? How can you help them to hear it?

Prayer

Jesus, I am so grateful to be included in the song of the angels this Christmas. I have seen the gospel transform lives that were broken and seemingly meaningless. Knowing you has brought new life to me and to so many others, and I am grateful, Jesus. Please accept my offering of praise as I also lift my voice to you: "Gloria in excelsis Deo! Gloria in excelsis Deo!" Amen.