



“Peace to People of Good Will”

Rev. Daniel Merz

(This homily was written for the Midnight Mass for the solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord, reflecting the scriptures for that Mass (Isaiah 9:1–6, Titus 2:11–14, and Luke 2:1–14). It may be adapted to be used at another time.)

The scriptures in today’s Mass especially emphasize the words “appearance” and “glory.” Hear these lines again from our readings. First, from Isaiah: The people who walked in darkness / have seen a great light; / upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom / a light has shone.

And from Titus: “The grace of God has appeared, saving all . . . the appearance of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ.”

And also the Gospel: “The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them

‘Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’”

Throughout Advent, we refrain from singing the Gloria, except on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, precisely to heighten our anticipation of the appearance of glory on this night. The Gloria is the song of the angels, and its words flow out as both commentary on, and response to, the appearance of the Lord of glory on this Christmas night. Let’s ponder for a moment what the revised translation of the Gloria has to teach us.

The first change we will hear with the revised translation of the Gloria comes in the second phrase of the hymn. We have been singing “peace to his people on earth” but will sing “peace to people of good will.” The phrase “good will” is new. The Church has always stressed the importance of the will, both human and divine. When our human will is ordered to the divine will, it is a “good will,” and consequently, we will experience true peace. When Jesus “appeared” in the flesh, he taught us what it looks like when a human will is in perfect communion with the divine will: “not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

Five verbs follow, flowing from this good and peaceful will. Conformed to Christ, we praise (God is wonderful in the gift of this child!), we bless (God is good and deserving of love for appearing to us in this way!), we adore (this appearance is worthy of awesome reverence!), we glorify (by living this mystery and letting it draw us closer to God), and lastly we give God thanks for his great glory (ultimately in the Eucharistic Prayer). The current translation only mentions three of these verbs, but each of the five reveals a different response to this appearance of God’s glory in our midst.

Our hymn proceeds to remind us of the unique glory that appeared on this night. The revised translation has restored the phrases “Only begotten Son” and “Son of the Father,” phrases that had been combined into “only Son of the Father.” The modifier “begotten” is important, because, though the Father has many children both by creation and by adoption, he has only one Son who was begotten from before the world began, and who is born for us on this night.

Lastly, the revised translation brings out the movement of Jesus, first toward us and then toward God. The hymn first states, “You take away the sins of the world,” an action focused on us. That action is followed with “receive our prayer.” The hymn continues, “you are seated at the right hand of the Father.” The translation we have been using follows this phrase with “receive our prayer,” but the original version follows it with “have mercy on us.” Seated at the right hand of the Father, Jesus has already ascended with our prayers. His purpose now is to intercede on our behalf for God’s mercy. In this, of course, is the culmination of the glory that first appeared on earth as a little child. Following his life, his suffering and death, he rose and ascended in full glory to the right hand of the Father. This is the definitive glory of our great God. The light of the Christ child, and of this holy and splendid night of peace and good will, must come to fruition in the radiance of the risen and ascended Christ.

Shortly, in this Eucharist, we will join in that upward movement of Christ to his Father. In his Word, he has come to us, and we must offer our prayers to him. In the Eucharistic Prayer, we will ascend with Christ to the right hand of the Father, where He is interceding for us. Let us open our hearts to this glory that our spirits might not remain only intent upon the child before us, but be raised with him to the heavenly throne of God.

