

On Earth Peace (Luke 2. 1-14)

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There's an ancient tradition in the Western church of singing what are called the 'O Antiphons' or the 'Great O's' in the last week of Advent.¹ These antiphons are short chants, sung at Vespers, which pray for the coming and anticipate the meaning of Christ, drawing on a range of images from Scripture. In English, the hymn 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel' paraphrases and brings most of the 'O's' together but in the mediaeval church each hymn was sung separately in the days leading up to Christmas in a crescendo of longing: O Wisdom ... Come; O Lord ... Come; O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Morning Star, O King of the Nations, O Emmanuel ... Come.

Some of you might remember that this year we began our Advent journey with a text that conceives of Jesus coming as the dawn, the Morning Star – in Latin, '*O Oriens*'. The image is drawn from the words of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist. 'the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace' (Luke 1.78-79). And in the last three weeks, we've been reflecting on this promised dawn of peace. We've wondered about the nature of the peace Christ is said to bring and, in the face of the violence, division and fracturing of our world, we've wondered how we realise its presence among and within us.

Today, as we draw to the end of our Advent journey, we hear that the dawn has come. 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people'. These words are stamped across a thousand Christmas cards like seasonal wallpaper. But the more I ponder them, the stranger they seem. For what they imply is that the fullest realisation and manifestation of God's purpose and meaning, the

¹ The 'O' Antiphons likely date to the 6th century, and are used at Vespers in the last seven days of Advent.

glory of God, is expressed on earth as peace, as genuine mutual caring between every member of the human family. Where God is, peace breaks out.

It's not an easy peace, a glib or sentimental peace. As we've seen, the peace of God disrupts the false peace for which we so readily settle, the illusory peace which tries to paper over injustice without truth-telling and over hurt without grieving. Thus, into a world settling for false peace, the dawn of God's peace may be at first an unsettling, uncomfortable thing; it's a peace that calls us into new and reconciled ways of being, new and merciful forms of relating. It's inherently vulnerable. And if you want to see what living from and enacting this peace looks like in a human life, then you only need to look to Jesus. Jesus who overturns the tables in the temple and who is wrenched with compassion for our confusion and grief; Jesus who passionately exposes the hardness of the self-satisfied and who gently regards those of no account.

On the gospels' account, Jesus reveals and enacts this peace of God because he is himself so wholly open to God, so absorbed and unfailingly responsive to God, that he can be spoken of as God's word, God's image, God's child.² He is 'the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being', says the letter to the Hebrews (1.3), the Prince of Peace. How he comes to be this way the gospels do not tell us. Rowan Williams writes we are given no evidence for how Jesus might have grown into this unwavering perception of the reality of God, this uninterrupted reflection of the light of heaven. The gospels simply attest to the effect of his presence, their sense of his steady vision. And this, Williams suggests, 'was almost certainly one of the things which prompted the conclusion that the life of Jesus was from its beginnings "owned" by God and transparent to [God] – the conclusion gradually refined into a doctrine of incarnation'.³ God with us.

And there's another mystery wrapped up in this mystery. It's that in listening to him, following him, loving him, we become like him. We too become bearers and

² Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God: peacemaking in troubled times* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1983, 2nd ed. 2005), p.79.

³ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.78.

occasions of God's peace. We too become offerings through which the glory of heaven might break into the life of earth to warm and transfigure the landscape of human possibility.

There's a beautiful word that expresses God's invitation into this reverent, receptive, loving absorption. The word is 'Behold'. 'Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people"' (Luke 2. 9-10). 'Behold' is often translated in English as 'see' or 'look'. But it's not the same kind of 'seeing' or 'looking' as ordinary bodily vision. It's seeing at a different level; not looking 'at' an object but entering into a new state of awareness, opening to presence. Maggie Ross says: "'Behold" is *the* marker word throughout the Bible. It signals shifting perspective, the holding together or even the conflating of radically different points of view'.⁴ Heaven and earth. It arises in silence and self-forgetfulness. In beholding, she says, 'Our settled accounting of ordinary matters is shattered and falls into nothing as light breaks upon us'.⁵

Behold, the Lamb of God, said John the Baptist, pointing to Jesus (John 1.29). Behold, I am with you always to the end of time, said the risen Jesus to his disciples (Matthew 28.20). Behold, I bring you good news of great joy (Luke 2.10).

Beholding, writes Ross, describes 'a reciprocal holding in being' – God beholding us, sustaining us in faithful regard; God offering God's self to be held, inviting us to 'hold God in being in space and time'. Says Ross: 'The scandal of the incarnation ... is that God is naked before us ... given over into our hands and hearts. And it is in the depths of this beholding, in the silence of the loving heart of God, that the divine exchange takes place most fully, where each of us in our uniqueness and

⁴ Maggie Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011), p.22.

⁵ Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart*, p.23.

strangeness is transfigured into the divine life. And it is for this that God comes to us, the Word made flesh, stable-born and crucified'.⁶

In the days before Christmas, the church sings the great 'O's'; 'O Come, O come' expressing the longing of earth for communion with heaven, the longing of creatures to behold the light of our life. In the one of the great Christmas hymns, we sing our response and pledge a reciprocal coming: 'O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem; come and behold him born the king of angels; O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord'.

Many of us enter into this Christmas season feeling wearied and sad by the events of this year, by the ubiquity of war in our fragile world, and by the suffering in our own lives and the lives of those we know and love. We yearn for peace. Not the glib and sentimental peace of Christmas glitz, but the true and lasting peace of wounds honoured, wrong repented and life transfigured by the light of love. Let us then offer ourselves to behold this gift of peace and respond to its call. O come, let us open ourselves to the mystery of God with us that God's love may be born anew within us.

⁶ Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart*, pp.24-25.