

These words aren't quite the ones we are familiar with! They suggest that not all people will know his peace after all! And yes, that is what it says!

The focus is on God – on who he is and where he rightly fits into the scheme of things. “Glory to God in the highest!” God is, of course, glorious in any case. We can't – and the angels didn't – add to his glory. What we do is acknowledge his glory. We bow down before him, not just with our words, but with our lives as well.

God's gracious offer of peace extends towards all the human race. But to know the peace the angels sang about we do have to make a response from our side. “Peace on earth to those on whom his favour rests!”

It is the message of God's gift that we learnt about years ago in those words of John 3.16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (KJV).

Wow! What a gift! Once we have received the Gift of God – Jesus Christ – into our life as our Saviour and Lord, we will want our whole life (and not just our Christmas) to express “glory to God in the highest”! What do you say to that?

Reflect:

- Quietly reflect and then share on the ways we will seek to give “glory to God” this Christmas and during the coming year.
- Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons (and daughters) of God” (Mt. 5.9). Quietly reflect and then share – In what ways is God calling us to spread his “peace on earth” in our community this Christmas and throughout the coming year?



Four Studies for Advent
by Peter J Blackburn

4. Glory to God!

Reading: Luke 2.1-20

Christmas is almost here again! Is it a year since last Christmas? Where has the time gone? For most it has been a time of rush – in spite of last year's resolve that it would never be so again.

The cash registers have peeped out the message that the economy can't really be too bad – if only Christmas could be made to extend throughout the year! Here and there a Santa Claus has beamed on young and old. And in a background the soft suggestion of “Jingle Bells”, “Rudolph” or one of the more traditional carols – not too intrusive, yet all insisting that it's the season to be jolly extravagant in our spending!

In some quarters it has become fashionable to laugh about faith in God, to infer that a believer is someone more than a little odd, that faith is one of those options that some people choose and others get along very well without.

From time to time we have cause to go to one of those “auto supplies” shops. They have a wide range of things for cars. So what do you want? A set of spark plugs? An oil filter? A fuel pump? Engine coolant? There's a good chance they'll have it. Perhaps you are looking for a protective strip down the sides of your car, or else just a decorative stripe. Maybe you want a CD player or just some ash tray freshener. Yes, you'll probably find it there too. Now, some of these things are essentials for the running of a car. Others are what we call “optional extras” – no matter how desirable, the car will run quite well without them.

A life without reference to God is like a car without an engine! Every day the news highlights again, at one point or another, the stupidity, the self-destructive stupidity of life without God. And Christmas comes again with the reminder that there is a God and he hasn't given up loving this stupidly independent race of human beings.

Reflect:

- “A life without reference to God is like a car without an engine”. Do we agree with this statement? What evidence do we see of “the self-destructive stupidity of life without God”? What does the Christmas message say to us about God – in spite of ourselves?

The best-known text in the Bible says, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3.16). These words express in a nutshell what Christmas is all about. The most-quoted words from the Christmas story tell the same message too – “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests!”

Reflect:

- The best-known text in the Bible... The most-quoted words from the Christmas story... What is this “same message” about God, about what he has done and about how we respond?

He came into our history

Read: Luke 2.1-7.

God’s love was so great that he moved into action. It happened at his right time, at a particular time in history. Luke wanted us to understand that this action of God is firmly anchored in human history – Augustus was Caesar in Rome, he had ordered his first census, Quirinius was governor of Syria.

It is widely accepted that the real purpose of this census was to ensure that the taxes were efficiently and rigorously collected. It’s quite likely that, when Augustus ordered everyone to register “at his own town”, he meant them to go to the town closest to where they lived. That would make sense for tax purposes. But the Jews had always been counted by tribes and families. I’ve always been intrigued by the thought that, when the Jews stubbornly insisted on returning to their ancestral homes, they were in part sabotaging the whole reason for the census! The data would be less than useful to the tax-collectors. Bethlehem’s tax-collector, for instance, would have ended up with a list of people from all over Palestine – and beyond!

But there’s another intriguing thought. The Romans counted every man, woman and child. If, in fact, we had all the records of Rome, the name of Jesus would be recorded in this census – as well as later in the record of crucifixions.

God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son... He came into our history. Part of that history is that there was no room for them to stay in the inn, that much later he had no place to lay his head, that the

people moved against him – the religious and the irreligious, the Jew and the Gentile – to get rid of him from the face of the earth.

But he came into our history – “Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord!” Even if we should choose to reject him, the message is still true – “Your Saviour has been born!”

No room! No room! No room! God is a very persistent lover! In his love God took our “No room!” and made it the very means of salvation, of forgiveness, of a new beginning for all of us. God is saying to us, “I have room for you! Come to me!”

Reflect:

- The Christian faith isn’t based on an idea, but on God’s action in human history. Jesus isn’t one helpful way to God among many, but the only way to come to the Father (Jn 14.6). How important is it that the very Son of God came into human history?
- “In his love God took our ‘No room!’ and made it the very means of salvation...” It is the theme of the redemption story again and again. It isn’t that the Father punished the Son for human sins. Yes, the Father allowed the “punishing”, but we humans did it. And the Father accepted our “punishing” of Jesus as the atonement for human sin. How do we respond to the God who has “room” for us? In what ways can we communicate God’s “roomy” love to the people of our community?

Glory to God and Peace on Earth

Read: Luke 2.8-20.

We live in the aftermath of September 11 and Bali – and the ensuing war on terrorism. We have witnessed suicide bombings in Israel and the shelling of targets even in Bethlehem.

Talk about “peace on earth and goodwill to all men” can seem like so much wishful thinking in today’s harsh world – a pleasant idea to keep alive, a nice piece of folklore or legend, but unrealistic, unreal, irrelevant, unbelievable...

Then it all comes unstuck when we hear it in a modern translation – “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”