

The Angel's Song is not merely a Seasonal Favourite

Henry Smidstra

St. Luke's Gospel account begins and ends in the temple, a creative, stylistic, arrangement of the Gospel. At the outset, a thin religion of externals is silenced and a whole new era is announced by heavenly voices in the open grazing region far distant from downtown Jerusalem and the temple. Sketched out in Luke's Gospel account is a picture of a transformed, enlarged place of Grace, inclusive enough to contain all people young and old, shepherds and common folk, male and female, citizen and refugee, defiled and undefiled, rich or poor. It is a picture of jubilee-society in process in which ultimately there is no prejudice, no poor, no war, peace and God's glory fills the earth. It is a totally new dimension of temple; interestingly at the end of Acts, Paul is under house-arrest preaching the Gospel indicating the complexity of the new pluralistic social-political situation in Christ.

The enlarged ethos, lived out by Jesus in the activities of daily life in gracious, dramatic, Word-act is narrated by Luke. Speaking and acting in the tradition of the Old Testament Prophets, Jesus is stretching the scope of what was considered proper religious activity to dimensions unimaginable before, causing considerable reaction and discontent amongst those who had much at stake in the maintenance of the status quo. Implicating issues of social status and political power, Jesus was "hitting" too close to home for some. Some, entrenched in economic interests and social benefits, enjoying privileged status, considered themselves righteous, deserving of their wealth and prestige, so unlike the despised, undeserving unrighteous of low estate....like shepherds, Galileans, sick, or poor. Luke is writing a "*right strawey*" Gospel to well-off folks acculturated and conditioned by Hellenistic culture, enjoying the international benefits of Roman *Pax*.

Luke's narrative begins with silence in the Temple in Jerusalem; Zechariah can't speak for nine months. But on the margins of society, to those of low estate there is privileged communication; to the lowly shepherds, the hills resound with the glorious message and the song of angels of the birth of the one who is breaking in with the new international order of grace and wellbeing: Glory to God in the Highest, and peace and goodwill, among all people (Lk. 2:14). The lyrics of the song of the angels of course have many variations in translation, perhaps revealing discomfort with inclusive, cosmic dimensions of Glory in Heaven and grace and peace on earth. The Song of the angels transcends any notions of the rule of *Pax* for prosperity that Theophilus and his friends may have experienced or dreamed of; and of any visions of righteousness that the shakers and movers of Jerusalem and Juda might have had. Angelic Singing of international honours to someone other and greater than Caesar, declaring a peace attributed to something other than *Pax Romana*, would be considered subversive, astounding! Not only was it being politically incorrect, it was insensitive, not doing justice to reigning, "proper" social values.

The word Luke uses for "peace" is not related to the Latin word, *pax*, which connotes an imposed peace; an order maintained by cruel, harsh, Imperial, Roman, military domination. Luke uses the Greek word, *Eirene*, "peace," conveying the meaning of a depth and scope of peace and wellness in every possible human social dimension as indicated by the Old Testament concept of *Shalom*. The sentiment conveyed by the word *eirene* goes beyond a warm greeting and invocation of peace and undisturbedness common

in Jewish greetings or farewells, but carries also the Hebraic sense of individual health and welfare (Souter, Pocket Lexicon to the New Testament, 1929). In the Dutch, the word for peace is also not a derivative of *pax*, but the word, *vrede*, is used, which is related to the pre-Roman, Anglo-Saxon, word, *frith*, (West Frisian, *frede*; German *friede*). *Vrede* indicates, not an imposed peace, but a peace worked out in community within its web of relationships (Bianchi, *Gerechtigheid als Vrijplaats*, 1985). The words “freedom” and “friend” are related to this non-Roman (non-Latin) concept of peace. *Vrede* refers to freedom, not in its extreme libertarian sense, but to a practice indicative of a deep holistic searching for, and community collaboration in, a deep nourishing social wellbeing for the human, social, common good. *Frith*, *vrede*, indicates an experience of peace not simply imposed from above, but mandates and facilitates an incarnate peace worked out in community amongst the people themselves, a freedom which makes life flourishing truly possible; an incarnational, participatory, peace. In prophetic terms, a peace that results in human flourishing for the least of those of our community: a people first, not a fiscal corporate policy first, position.

The scope of the message of the song of the Angels of Luke 2:14 is one of marvelous, expansive and empowering glory and wellbeing, one transcending any earthly imperial power. In my Dutch tradition it is still sung in Dutch in many CRC Churches in Canada, usually at Christmas and New Year. In the Dutch, the song of the angels begins with an emphasis on acknowledgment: *...ere zij God...* praise, honour, to God; and peace, *vrede*, on earth. The factor of fear of total unworthiness of those considered simply reprobate or of low estate is challenged, singing of peace and wellbeing at full volume from the deepest places of the heart. Similarly this message of “scandalous generosity” of grace had been fearsome at first to the shepherds who first heard the choral gospel message, sequestered in the hinterlands of Judea. The Good news was certainly first and foremost Good news for the oppressed, the marginalized, and the invalid...those invalidated by the prejudice and social categorization, of a negative public attitude reified into a toxic social doctrine which was tearing the social fabric. In Dutch we continue, singing in repetitive rounds the message of peace on earth and, “...in the people a wellbeing.” (*...in the mensen een welbehagen*)...I consider it an existential expression, an extension of, *shalom-eirene* of the common good, of God’s gracious disposition, extended to all especially to those assigned to low estate in a culture that obsessively valued power and prosperity. The angelic message makes it plain, that unity on earth is achieved, not by imperial or corporate power and prestige, but by the eternal value of divine-human love expressed unashamedly in and for the world.

The Angels’ message of peace and wellbeing is as relevant today as ever. The status quo and the public policies geared for progress, prosperity, and public safety, are challenged today by the heavenly message of God’s desire for the Good for universal human flourishing, especially for those of low estate. Locally our authorities promise safe streets, trusting in tough crime control and harsh “truth in sentencing” policies, resulting in Canadian prisons being filled disproportionately by the poor, the ill, and the politically “unimportant” ones; current Canadian repressive crime policies are actually grounded in the disproved theory of deterrence. Current public policy follows more the model of Caesar’s *Pax* by imposition, than the peace of God’s Way through Christ in Humility, mercy, and righteousness. Our present government will not take seriously the plight of the first nations pleas for respect, unwilling it seems, or unable, to recognize the broken social fabric, torn by a century of oppressive, legislated

exploitation, while “preaching” a “gospel” of positivism and economic development. As well it seems that the church is still enveloped in a conspiracy of silence on what it considers negatively to be a “social gospel,” while benefiting from the market forces of free enterprise. The gospel of peace it seems is either simply just perceived to be for the inner soul, for salvation in the age to come, but not to be universally or inclusively experienced today in the “real world.” Food banks and Salvation Army kettles will be enough to do justice to the plight of the less fortunate; trying to make peace by declaring war on everything. Perhaps too much social Darwinism, Machiavellianism, and Hobbesian thinking has filtered into the social political world view of today’s believers? The score of the angelic chorus of the Divine proclamation of peace and wellbeing to all is perhaps tucked away till next Christmas along with all the other Christmas carol sheets. Too much talk of peacemaking and restorative justice seems to be upsetting.

One wonders how Theophilus and the first readers of Luke’s Gospel endured the status quo and spirit of their time. We know that the Pharisees and teachers of the Law found the message of Jesus offensive when He was alive; Jesus was certainly not unconcerned in warning them of the error of their ways. ...Woe to you who are rich... (Luke 6:24-36; 11:37-54)! Jesus, likewise in the Temple just before his death, acting in true prophetic form, was setting the tables aright according to the mind and heart of God, to turn the hearts of humanity to true justice; it is to be people-first In the new inclusive temple of Christ’s Body. Christ was about to extend the boundaries of his health giving rule to all people; it was a call to all to contemplate and acknowledge the Good as created by God, and not worship the subtle promises of the gods and goddesses of corporate profit, or of public safety, promises achieved through repressive, cruel, objectifying, means, or consisting in thin religion consisting only of obsessive, empty, external ritual. In the ways that St. James and Bonhoeffer indicated, true religion may not simply be relegated to the relative safety of traditional seasonal ritual, dogma, or ideology, safely isolated from poverty, racism, and the anomie of modern consumer society, for a start. Christ would rather us be incarnate in the centre of daily living with all its questions, confusion, sin, and hot-button issues. Salvation is not simply an answer to all life’s problem, but it is our faith lived with our whole lives, a faith relevant also to issues which are deemed settled or off-limits by religion or culture. Life’s changing conditions require constant dialogue enlightened by the Eternal values of the message of the Angels. Christ has come as one who gave his life as a sign of the ultimate worth and value of all human beings, all being precious in God’s sight. Validating the ultimate worth of our own and our neighbour’s humanity is what justice is about. We are called not merely to religion, suggests Bonhoeffer, but to faith and living (*Religionless Christianity*). Faith is not merely a seasonal, personal, inner joy of remembering the Angel’s song, but it is a daily listening, and living out, its melody in justice, mercy, and kindness, and long-suffering, unconditional love.

The Angelic gospel in song may have been perceived as offensive by some people in positions of power and social standing in Jesus’ and Luke’s time. No doubt that will be the case in our time too. Those enjoying the privileges of elevated status don’t like being accountable to those “undeserving poor,” or liable for their sins and shortcomings regarding their social-political lives. Let’s be honest, by and large the Church in North America is composed of the “haves” of the earth and finds a way to justify the way things are without calling for legislated changes that champion the needs of the oppressed and have-

notes. Minority voices remain sequestered on the margins. Speaking too frankly about specific injustices and of the social-structural responsibilities of the “haves” and those in public office often hits too close to home, unless cloaked in the lyrics of a traditional seasonal song. The Angels’ Chorus of Good News proclaims not an imperialistic, triumphalist, message of domination, but rather of universal *agape*, it comes from God’s heart of sacrificial love for the world (Jn. 3:16). At the core it is Good News from God who suffers with and for His people. It is God’s love and His jealous desire for the Good of human flourishing for all; and, it is God’s deep desire that none be lost.

The Good News is holistic, organic, and good news for all; it was not an adversarial, angry, message of judgment and condemnation of wrongdoers. It was not a holier-than-thou, message of damnation that defined the ancient prophetic tradition, suggests Abraham Heschel (1977). He defines the prophetic tradition as one arising out of *divine pathos*; one *shared* and participated in by the prophet. God is intimately concerned about the welfare of his created image bearers and pulls all stops, rebuking and compassionate, to call all from the wrong direction, from “broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer.2:12-13), to abundant life, to shalom. The prophet stands in the tension of the antithesis, not over against the erring; the prophet reveals both the heart and mind of God to the people, and mediates the needs of the people to God. The prophet was not only a censurer and accuser but also consoler and comforter. The ancient prophets were viscerally involved in that drama of reclamation (Heschel, 1977).

The gospel calls us not to condemnation, not to condemn, to blame, to do violence, but in practical wisdom to engage in dramatic or creative speech, or perhaps in creative, forceful, Word-acts dynamically equivalent to those of Jeremiah, or of Jesus in the Temple. We are not called to violence or war to change the world, but rather to express the health giving rule of God in Christ in whatever worldly sphere of influence we are privileged to be a presence of the Presence. Once again, reflecting the history of my presence in Canada’s prisons, sensitive to the shortcomings of, and abuses in, the criminal justice system, I end with insights from Abraham J. Heschel, on “What Manner of Man is the Prophet.” In a visceral participatory way, he says, we are called to live disclosing”...*a divine pathos*, not just a divine judgment”. Few are guilty he states, we are all sinners to be forgiven after all, but all are responsible. The prophets, Heschel says, remind us of the moral state of a people:

Few are guilty, but all are responsible. If we admit that the individual is in some measure conditioned or affected by the spirit of society, an individual’s crime discloses society’s corruption. In a community not indifferent to suffering, uncompromisingly impatient with cruelty and falsehood, continually concerned for God and every man [*sic*], crime would be infrequent rather than common.” From Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, New York, 1962, in *Religion for a New Generation*, J. Needleham, et al, eds., New York, 1977, p.153.

The message of the Angelic choral proclamation may not be tucked away with the carol sheets till next Christmas or New Year season, It must be lived daily, worldly, as we acknowledge our God who gives our daily bread and calls us also to establish his will, of *Eirene*, on earth as it is in heaven.