

Christmas Eve
Friday, December 24, 2010
11 o'clock (Shepherds' Mass, the 'Midnight Mass')

GOSPEL: Luke 2:8-20

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

8Καὶ ποιμένες ἦσαν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῇ αὐτῇ ἀγραυλοῦντες καὶ φυλάσσοντες φυλακὰς τῆς νυκτὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ποίμνην αὐτῶν. 9καὶ ἄγγελος κυρίου ἐπέστη αὐτοῖς καὶ δόξα κυρίου περιέλαμψεν αὐτούς, καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν. 10καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ ἄγγελος, Μὴ φοβεῖσθε, ἰδοὺ γὰρ εὐαγγελίζομαι ὑμῖν χαρὰν μεγάλην ἣτις ἔσται παντὶ τῷ λαῷ, 11ὅτι ἐτέχθη ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτὴρ ὅς ἐστιν Χριστὸς κύριος ἐν πόλει Δαυὶδ· 12καὶ τοῦτο ὑμῖν τὸ σημεῖον, εὐρήσετε βρέφος ἐσπαργανωμένον καὶ κείμενον ἐν φάτνῃ. 13καὶ ἑξαίφνης ἐγένετο σὺν τῷ ἀγγέλῳ πλῆθος στρατιᾶς οὐρανοῦ αἰνούντων τὸν θεὸν καὶ λεγόντων, 14Δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας. 15Καὶ ἐγένετο ὡς ἀπῆλθον ἀπ' αὐτῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν οἱ ἄγγελοι, οἱ ποιμένες ἐλάλουν πρὸς ἀλλήλους, Διέλθωμεν δι' ἕως Βηθλέεμ καὶ ἴδωμεν τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο τὸ γεγονός ὃ ὁ κύριος ἐγνώρισεν ἡμῖν. 16καὶ ἦλθον σπεύσαντες καὶ ἀνεῦραν τὴν τε Μαριάμ καὶ τὸν Ἰωσήφ καὶ τὸ βρέφος κείμενον ἐν τῇ φάτνῃ; 17ἰδόντες δὲ ἐγνώρισαν περὶ τοῦ ῥήματος τοῦ λαληθέντος αὐτοῖς περὶ τοῦ παιδίου τούτου. 18καὶ πάντες οἱ ἀκούσαντες ἐθαύμασαν περὶ τῶν λαληθέντων ὑπὸ τῶν ποιμένων πρὸς αὐτούς; 19ἡ δὲ Μαριάμ πάντα συνετήρει τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα συμβάλλουσα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς. 20καὶ ὑπέστρεψαν οἱ ποιμένες δοξάζοντες καὶ αἰνοῦντες τὸν θεὸν ἐπὶ πᾶσιν οἷς ἤκουσαν καὶ εἶδον καθὼς ἐλαλήθη πρὸς αὐτούς.

I'll Be Home for Christmas

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”¹

With those words, the Christmas Gospel, as we call it today, comes to a conclusion. It's how the portion ends that we read every year at the Second Mass of Christmas Eve, also known as the *Missa Pastorales* ... the Shepherd's Mass.

The Gospel Writer we call Luke introduces into his story of the Birth of Jesus an anonymous group of shepherds, who are met by a holy messenger (ἄγγελος κυρίου) (*angelos kuriou*)... in the Greek of which this Gospel was written, an *angel* of the *Lord*. The stage is set for fear and trembling, who would not when met by a towering, majestic, frightening divine messenger claiming to come from the Creator of the Universe? ... but the words are not to bring fear and trembling, but good news ... in the Greek it's a little play on words, the word for 'bringing good news' is εὐαγγελίζομαι ... so the *angelos* (messenger) has come with words of *euangelia* (a good message).

We sometimes forget that in the Story. We sometimes forget that the whole point of the Story is one of good news that is as the chief *angelos kuriou* is joined by no less than 6,024 other *angeli* ... who begin to sing a doxology of praise to God, and sing a hope of peace on the earth. It's the whole point of the Christmas Story ... praise to God, peace on the earth.

Once things got quiet and the eyes of the shepherds again grew accustomed to the dark of the starry night ... relieved and wondering what to do next ... they go and find the Mother and the Father and the Baby and ... they tell their story ... so says the wonderful, expressive, grand Storyteller Luke.

And that Story, says the wonderful, expressive, grand Storyteller Luke ... was so magnificent that everyone else who heard it agreed ... and then comes the part that most of us either forget, or neglect, or just pass out of our range of attention ... the part that I love the most about the Christmas Gospel and Christmas itself ... it's the part where we learn in the Story that *they went home!*

I always chuckle to myself a bit when I read those words again ... because they are very intentional words from the pen of Luke ... the shepherds did not linger or loiter around the birthplace ... they did not delay their exit ... but (writes Luke) *they returned* to what they were doing, being shepherds, tending the flock, fighting off the dangerous animals who like to eat sheep at night, protecting their charge, caring for their sheep ... but now with a difference ... with a life-changing difference. They went home with a new Story on their lips, and in their hearts, and in their spirits ... they were Good News Shepherds one might say ... and that's the point of that last phrase in the Christmas Gospel ... they began to sing the doxology of praise of God, and if thus singing, then also bringing – would you not expect – a doxology of Goodness and Love and Peace to everyone they met ... (?)

That is the Christmas Message, right there. What are we to do who come here tonight to sing our doxologies around the Christ Child? Stay here in Church? Linger and loiter around the Crèche?

¹ Luke 2.20

Continue old ways of grumtiude and grouchiness? Forget to labor to make the world in which we live a better place?

No ... the Christmas Gospel is this: "Go home! ... but with a doxology of Goodness, Love and Peace that you have met in the Child of Bethlehem in your heart and in your mouth, in your mind and in your words, in your thoughts and in your actions, so that Goodness, Love and Peace are spoken into Creation, brought about by you ... because you have been changed for being in the Presence of the Holy One this Silent and Holy Night.

And let us together say: **Amen.**

Deo Gratias (+)
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