

SERMON XVII.

THE SONG OF THE ANGELS.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”
Luke ii. 14.

THE most important event recorded in the annals of time, is the incarnation of the Son of God. Anointed to be “the Apostle and High Priest of our profession,” it was necessary that he should humble himself, to assume our degraded nature, and enter into our suffering condition. Had he appeared on earth in the unmitigated glory of his Godhead, the children of men could not have borne the revelation, and could not have been benefited by his personal ministry; neither could he have been “touched with the feeling of our infirmities,” nor have offered himself a sacrifice for our sins. His manifestation in the flesh was essential to the great objects of his advent; and no wonder the heavenly host descended to announce his coming, and poured forth their delight in this joyful strain;—“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Let us consider, *first*, The incarnation of the Eternal Word; and, *secondly*, The song of the angels on the occasion of his birth.

I. Though it is impossible for the immutable God to be made a creature, yet the Divine nature was so closely and mysteriously joined to the human, that the same person was “a child born,” and “the Mighty God”—“a son given,” and “the Everlasting Father.” The Divinity did not become humanity, and the humanity did not become Divinity; but the two were so united as to constitute but one glorious Mediator.

Though his incarnation did not destroy, or even tarnish in the

least, the essential glory of the Deity ; yet was it a mighty and marvellous condescension, for him who is "over all, God, blessed for ever," thus to assume our frail and suffering flesh. Solomon asked—"Will God in very deed dwell with men upon the earth?" A question which neither men nor angels could answer. But God hath answered it himself, and answered it in the affirmative. "The Word" that "was in the beginning with God, and was God," in the fulness of time, "was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

We can form no idea of the natural distance between God and man. But the infinite vacuum is filled up by the Messiah. He is "Emmanuel"—"the true God," and "the Son of Man." "He thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and took upon himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of sinful flesh." Passing by the nobler nature of angels, "he took on him the seed of Abraham." Nor did he join himself to humanity in its original perfection and glory. He came into the mean condition of fallen creatures, sharing with us our various infirmities and sufferings. Yet he was free from all moral contamination. He was "holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners." He "knew no sin." He "did no iniquity, neither was guile found in his mouth."

But notwithstanding the humility of his appearance in Bethlehem, such was the dignity of his person, and such the magnitude and grandeur of the work for which he came into the world, that angels descended from heaven to publish the glad tidings to the children of men. True, no ambassadors were sent to the Sanhedrim at Jerusalem—none to the Senate of Rome, to proclaim the coming of the Prince of Peace ; but never was there such an embassy on earth, to announce the birth of a royal son, as that which came to the shepherds of Bethlehem. When he appeared among men, the order was given in heaven, that all the angels of God should worship him ; and their example was followed by wise men upon earth. The prophet Isaiah said that his name should be called Wonderful ; and the angel informed Mary that he should be great, and should be called the Son of the Highest ; and that God should give unto him the throne of his father David, and he should reign over the house of Jacob for ever. "Though he was rich, yet for our sake

he became poor, that we through his poverty might be rich." He humbled himself that we might be exalted—was bruised and wounded that we might be healed—died the most shameful death that men could inflict, that we might live the most glorious life that God can confer!

II. Let us now consider the import of the anthem, sung by the heavenly host, when he was born in Bethlehem. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

1. "Glory to God in the highest." The shining light between the cherubim, on the mercy-seat, was called "the glory of the Lord," being a supernatural representation of his presence in the sanctuary. Three of the apostles saw the same glory upon the mount of transfiguration, and all believers have seen it by faith. The word "glory," in the anthem of the angels, refers to the divine honor and praise resulting from the humiliation of Christ. The redemption of sinners, through the blood of the cross, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit, is not only consistent with the glory of God, but highly promotive of his glory, as our Creator and Lawgiver. It brightens all the gems previously visible in his crown, and reveals others that were concealed. His glory, as seen in the works of creation and providence, is the glory of wisdom, power, and love. His glory, as seen in his law and its administration, is the glory of holiness, justice, and truth. These are essential to his nature and his government. But in the incarnation and the cross of Christ, we behold a new glory, a glory nowhere else displayed, the glory of mercy. God was known before to be the friend of saints, but here he shows himself the friend of sinners. His character as previously revealed was matter of admiration and praise in earth and heaven, but this new revelation occasions new wonder and rejoicing to men and angels. Angels delighted to bear the joyful news to men, and this was the burden of their message:—"Behold, we bring you glad tidings of great joy, which shall be unto"—the righteous? the benevolent and charitable? no; but—"unto all people." And what are these tidings? "To you is born, this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." Here is the Lawgiver embracing the rebels; his the glory, theirs the benefit; while angels participate the joy of both, singing—"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace."

2. "On earth peace." Not by a compromise with Satan, as he

proposed when he tempted the Son of God in the wilderness. Not at the expense of the Divine law, but by magnifying and making it honorable. Not a peace with enmity, for Christ hath slain the enmity by his cross. Our peace flows from the reconciling blood of Jesus. Nothing else could satisfy the claims of Divine justice, and procure pardon for the penitent believer.

Without the atonement, there is no peace for sinners. There is an accusing witness within. Behold that king in the banqueting-house! Why changes his countenance? Why tremble his knees? Have the wise men of Babylon interpreted the mystic writing upon the wall? No; but conscience has. Conscience has given dreadful intimations of its meaning, before Daniel comes into the presence of the king, and the Hebrew prophet only confirms the previous interpretation. Every sinner bears about with him that internal tormentor. It may be bribed; but not for ever. It may be lulled to sleep; but it will awake with increased energy, and augmented wrath. The gnawing worm may be stupified for a season, but cannot be killed. The devouring fire may be temporarily stifled, but cannot be quenched. How dreadful are its torments, when it wreaks all its anger upon the guilty! To be drowned in the Red Sea, like Pharaoh—to be swallowed up by the earth, like Korah—to be hewn in pieces, like Agag—to be eaten of worms, like Herod—is nothing in the comparison.

Where shall we find peace? We have heard of a stone which nothing but blood can dissolve. Such a stone is the human conscience. But all the blood shed on Jewish altars could never effect the work. It must be the blood of Jesus. He is "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." At his cross, the believer's conscience finds assurance and repose. He is the good physician, and his blood is the sovereign balm. Come to his extended arms! Come, for he waits to be gracious!

3. "Good will toward men." The "good will" of whom? Of God, blessed for ever. The funds of a benevolent society may be exhausted, so that its members in distress can receive no benefit. But in the "good will" of God we find unsearchable riches of grace, sufficient to pay off our whole debt to the law, and restore our forfeited inheritance; to bring forth the prisoners, and them that sit in darkness, out of the prison-house; to support the believer through life, and comfort him in death, and raise him from the grave not a

beggar, or a pensioner, but a prince, clothed in white, and entitled to an everlasting kingdom.

Did I possess the nature of angels, with my present sinfulness, I should have no hope of salvation, for God hath provided no mercy for fallen angels; but, in his infinite wisdom, he hath devised a method for the consistent display of his "good will toward men," by assuming their nature, and in that nature atoning for their sins. This is a wonderful scheme, whereby God can be just, and yet justify the ungodly. His law is honoured, though its violater be acquitted; and his government is secure, though the rebel be forgiven.

Methinks I hear the Infant in Bethlehem, speaking from the manger, in the strain of the Evangelical Prophet:—"Is my hand shortened at all, that I cannot redeem; or have I no power to deliver? Behold, at my rebuke I dry up the sea, and make the rivers a wilderness; I clothe the heavens with blackness, and make sackcloth their covering. Though ye see me in human flesh, I am still Lord of all, and can save unto the uttermost. Though ye do not hear me, I have the tongue of the learned, to speak a word in season to him that is weary. I have taken upon myself your nature, that I may be able to sympathize in your sufferings, and make satisfaction for your sins. For you will I give my back to the smiters, and my cheek to them that pluck off the hair; and I will not hide my face from shame and spitting. Calvary and Joseph's grave shall manifest my benevolence, and it shall be seen that my mercy is mightier than death. Who will contend with me? Let him come near! Let us stand together! I challenge all the powers of darkness to defeat the purposes of my grace. I will triumph by suffering. I will dash them in pieces as a potter's vessel. Hell shall tremble at the report; and on every gate and door-post, in all my journey from this place to Golgotha, and thence home to my Father's house, shall be inscribed the record of my good will toward men!"

"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Behold him pressing the wine of eternal life for us from the cup of his own mortality; demolishing the kingdom of darkness on earth, and establishing in its stead the kingdom of heaven; destroying the works of the devil, delivering the captives from his iron yoke, and uniting sinners to himself in everlasting fellowship and love. The

whole economy of Divine grace, based on the incarnation of the Son of God, is like a complicated piece of machinery, consisting of many wheels, all revolving in harmony, and impelled by the same power. Salvation is a river, flowing from the manger in Bethlehem, conveying eternal life to millions, and bearing away many a precious gem from the dominions of death and hell. It has already swept from the earth more false gods than would have filled the Roman Pantheon; and carried multitudes of human souls, pardoned and purified, to Abraham's bosom. No opposition of men or devils can stand before "the glorious gospel of the blessed God." O that its light may shine into the heart and the conscience of every hearer! May the goodness of God lead you all to repentance, and fill you with peace in believing! Then will you go forth with joy, and publish his "good will toward men;" and when the purposes of his mercy are accomplished in your hearts, you shall be removed from grace to glory—from peace to perfect love—and sin and sorrow shall be shut out for ever! Amen.