**#38 All Saints Bromsgrove**

**Christmas Morning, 2021: from Rev. Richard Sandland**

**Psalm 98**

**Praise the Judge of the World**

**A Psalm.**

**1**O sing to the Lord a new song,  
    for he has done marvelous things.  
His right hand and his holy arm  
    have gotten him victory.  
**2**The Lord has made known his victory;  
    he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.  
**3**He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness  
    to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen  
    the victory of our God.

**4**Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;  
    break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

**5**Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,  
    with the lyre and the sound of melody.  
**6**With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
    make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.

**7**Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
    the world and those who live in it.  
**8**Let the floods clap their hands;  
    let the hills sing together for joy  
**9**at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming  
    to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
    and the peoples with equity.

Gospel John 1: 1-14

**1**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2**He was in the beginning with God. **3**All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4**in him was life,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john%201:1-14&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26039a)] and the life was the light of all people. **5**The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

**6**There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. **7**He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. **8**He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. **9**The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john%201:1-14&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26044b)]

**10**He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. **11**He came to what was his own,[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john%201:1-14&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26046c)] and his own people did not accept him. **12**But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, **13**who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

**14**And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son,[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john%201:1-14&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26049d)] full of grace and truth.

Sermon:

Such a very famous and wonderful Gospel reading is both a gift and a challenge to fledgling preacher. How can you say anything that hasn’t been said before? You can feel overwhelmed with a reading like this, in many ways its far better to have, say, something obscure from Deuteronomy to go with. As with all prophecy, though, when we speak about God in Christ, we’re joining a conversation that has stretched across millennia – *joining* a conversation, not necessarily leading one. If we approach the bible in this way, then we’re all in with a chance.

What is it about this reading that is so heart-warming? On one level, the reading is packed full of memorable phrases; whoever was inspired by God to write these thoughts down in this way was truly a poet, they had a way of echoing in words the richness and resonance of the message. Even when you read or hear it for the hundredth time, it is jaw droppingly memorable and beautiful.

And today, of all days, when we hear ‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory..’ the mystery, grace and love that the birth we’re celebrating is confirmed, and we are in awe of the generosity and love of God. The Word lived *among* us, He isn’t an aloof, distant God, who demands tribute and sacrifice; this is God who gives in such abundance that we willingly offer our worship back; it’s not demanded, and *therefore* we give it.

In contrast, I’m reminded of the words in Amos where the prophet, with some issues about the form of worship that is offered. He says,

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
    and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
**22**Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
    I will not look upon.  
**23**Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
    I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

That representation of God couldn’t be more starkly contrasted with the one we give thanks for today. In our incarnation prayers and readings, God in Christ is revealed as vulnerable, loving, inclusive, gracious, and *amongst us*. What blessings on our lives this reading, on this day, represents.

As Christ’s people, we are people of feelings, and sometimes it seems like we have difficulty expressing what we think about the child, the man, the God, born today. Some of us prefer to express what we feel in pictures, or images, or in sounds, or through our own creativity, through being in the natural world, or in words. There isn’t a right or a wrong way to try to express our love of Christ. I like words, sometimes too much, I think, but I searched around for the best words I could find to express what today means.

Last week, I returned to my old workplace at the Royal Shakespeare Company, to read at the Company Carol Service. Pre-Covid this involved 500 of the theatrical great and good assembling at Holy Trinity Stratford; at that time, Bishop Martin was the vicar there.

I always had a great deal of difficulty over the last 20 years, getting any bible reading into the RSC Order of Service, the Company being generally peopled by those for who God is, perhaps, a threat rather than a promise. This year, it was much reduced thought Covid, and I did manage to cram a part of today’s gospel into what I read. But the experience sent me back to thinking about what Shakespeare said about Christmas.

As it turns out, he said very little; there’s a short section in Love’s Labours Lost, a play that I never ever understood. He called another of his plays Twelfth Night, but that’s not particularly Christmassy.

But there is a very short section in Hamlet, written around 1601, where Shakespeare is explicit about Christmas. Imagine the scene – its cold, night-time, on the battlements of the castle at Elsinore; two watchmen have seen a ghost there in previous days and are on the lookout, and they are scared. They see the ghost again and try to speak with it; but the morning cockerel crows and the ghost fades away. For Shakespeare’s society, night was a time of fear – imagine, no electric light, just flickering tallow candles, so the coming of the morning light, heralded by the cockerel crowing, was a time of relief. And at Christmas, as we heard, the true light enlightens everyone.

It’s at this point that Shakespeare writes;

‘Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes

Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,

This bird of dawning singeth all night long;

And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,

The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,

No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,

So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

The power of John’s words are echoed in Shakespeare’s; both express the inexpressible – the love and majesty of God, incarnate today in the child born for us and for our salvation, at Bethlehem of Judea.

So hallowed and so gracious is this time; so however you celebrate, in words, or songs, or pictures or in Hugh Grant films, and however you ponder these things of wonder in your hearts this day, I wish you all a very happy Christmas.

Amen.

1. Hamlet (?1601) 1.1.151-157, RSC Edition, Macmillan/RSC, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)