

## *Christmas Day 2021*

**John 1: 1-14**

*'Amazing Christmas' - Michael Brown*

*"He rules the world with truth and grace" - Isaac Watts from 'Joy to the World'*

Some phrases from today's Gospel Reading : *'full of grace and truth';  
In the beginning was the Word; The light shines in the darkness.*

### **Opening Hymn**

#### **'Give Thanks'**

##### Chorus

Give thanks with a grateful heart,  
give thanks to the Holy One;  
give thanks, because he's given  
Jesus Christ, his Son.

##### Verse

And now let the weak say 'I am strong',  
let the poor say 'I am rich',  
because of what the Lord has done for  
us; [Chorus]

Author: Henry Smith \*© Copyright 1978 Integrity's Hosanna! Music

'Amazing Grace' is nowadays possibly the most well known hymn in the English language. Its rise in popularity began with the recording by the folk singer Judy Collins in 1970 and then accelerated through interest in the author John Newton's part in the abolition of the slave trade after he had been a slave trader himself. His later career as a clergyman in the Church of England may be of less interest to many

of the people, christian or otherwise, who find great meaning in the words of this hymn when set to its most familiar tune.

On Christmas Day 1752, John Newton was still employed as a ship's captain and was away from home. In a letter to his wife he wrote that *'If we are really Christians, and do indeed believe the tenor of the Scriptures, with what serious thankfulness and joyful composure ought we to commemorate the coming of our Saviour into the world.'* ("Tenor" as used here stands for 'meaning conveyed by'.)

What would a 'serious' commemoration of Christmas look like? Would it be a Christmas with a long face? Well it's hard to imagine that by 'serious' Newton meant grave or solemn and at the same time 'joyful'. More likely, he wanted to convey a sense of sincerity, of valuing something as important.

And this will be how we can all celebrate Christmas this year whether we are able to attend church or are prevented from doing so in these difficult times. We remember the birth of Jesus sincerely in prayer and in thanksgiving. This does not need to be an arduous thing to do. A few minutes of quiet reflection will be enough.

And 'joyful composure' - what does that mean? Simply this: a joyful, tranquil calmness. The calmness we can all remember from countless acts of worship, from morning light striking through stained glass, from that peace which descends on a congregation after they have received the sacraments, from setting sun at Evensong.

How as Newton meant it can we be serious and joyful at the same time? Imagine professional musicians performing that piece of Beethoven's which is usually known as Ode to Joy. They will be concentrating seriously, treating the occasions whether in a huge auditorium or in a small concert hall as equally important - but they will be calm because they know the music.

And in a similar way we can be serious and joyful at the same time because we know Jesus through word and sacrament, and because Jesus knows us. When we speak of Incarnation, the Word become Flesh, this is shorthand for saying that God entered fully into human life as we know it, not into some impersonal set of ideas that we need to rack our brains over to understand. God’s gesture in the birth of Christ is echoed in the many gestures of compassion and kindness seen at St Andrew’s since the beginning of the pandemic. The arrangements made for regular contact with the congregation, the rearrangements so that eucharistic worship could continue at all, the creativity of musicians and singers - these are all gestures of hope for the future.

### HYMN INTERLUDE

<b>‘Joy to the World’</b>	
<p><b>1. Joy to the world, the Lord is come!</b>            Let earth receive her King;            let ev’ry heart prepare him room            and heav’n and nature sing,            and heav’n and nature sing,            and heav’n, and heav’n and nature sing.</p>	<p><b>2. Joy to the earth, the Saviour reigns!</b>            Let men their songs employ,            while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and            plains, repeat the sounding joy,            repeat the sounding joy,            repeat, repeat the sounding joy.</p>
<p>Words: Isaac Watts (1674-1748) Music: G F Handel (1685-1759)</p>	

The opening verse of our Gospel reading ‘In the beginning was the Word’ is so familiar that we are apt to overlook the ambiguity of meaning attached to ‘word’ used as a translation for the Greek ‘logos’ (origin of ‘...ology’ in the famous advert). The translation by J B Phillips tried to get over this by saying ‘*In the beginning God expressed himself. That personal expression, that word, was with God...*’ Obviously that sounds clumsy and inelegant compared with the familiar versions but it does get across the point that ‘Word’ means a lot more than words, that christianity is not just a lot of talk.

When John the gospel writer goes on to speak of ‘full grace and truth’, ‘grace’, means an undeserved favour, an act of compassion beyond our understanding. And ‘truth’ means ‘the christian revelation’. Both these qualities are said to belong to the Word which for John means Jesus the Christ.

But Jesus is not full of grace in the same way that we might hand someone a glass full to the brim. Jesus is full of grace which is overflowing, spilling out, otherwise such grace would remain a self-contained possession and would never be available to us.

And ‘truth’ does mean corresponding to reality but it also means ‘an unveiling’ , a showing forth of something that could not be seen before. The light from a lantern will only shine in the dark if it is unshuttered.

### **Concluding Hymn**

<b>‘Amazing Grace’</b>	
<p><b>3.</b> Through many dangers, toils and snares, We have already come.  'Tis grace has brought us safe thus far,  And grace will lead us home.</p>	<p><b>4.</b> The Lord has promised good to us,  His word our hope secures;  He will our shield and portion be,  As long as life endures.</p>
<p>Words [slightly amended]: John Newton (1725-1807) Music: from <i>Virginia Harmony</i> 1831</p>	

***From Reader to readers: A Happy and A Blessed Christmas to you all.***