

Year C

Psalm 148

On the evening of 20th July 1969 people across the world were huddled around black and white TV sets, breathless as they watched a grainy image. Those who didn't have TV sets had gone to the homes of neighbours who did. No one wanted to miss what was being shown on the screen. The air was thick with excitement and nervous tension. Then at four minutes to eleven a white suited Neil Armstrong stepped from his spacecraft onto the surface of the moon,

uttering the immortal words, “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Getting to the moon was a phenomenal achievement. It signalled hope that we humans could achieve great things. But from another perspective it signalled the very worst about us. Eight years before Armstrong stepped on the moon the Russians put a man named Gagarin into a spaceship and launched him into orbit around the earth, the first ever manned space flight. That moment shamed the people of the United States. It was the time

of the Cold War and once Gagarin went into space the US was determined to beat the Russians to the moon. They redoubled their efforts, the space program became a national priority.

Why? What was so important about being first to the moon? The race to the moon was a race for bragging rights. It was a competition to show which nation had the greatest know-how, which system – Capitalism or Communism – the most advanced technology, the cleverer scientists.

A report to the House Subcommittee on Manned Space Flight of the Committee on

Science and Astronautics in 1974 stated that the Apollo moon program cost \$25.4 billion, which equates to over \$100 billion in today's values. All of this occurred at a time when the US and the world were filled with hungry people.

The greatest sin of humanity is to believe that it is the centre of the universe: to always ask the question, 'what's in it for us?'

The Psalter, the collection of one hundred and fifty Psalms in our Bible, is divided into five books, reflective of the five books of the Law, the Pentateuch. The final five Psalms in the Psalter, all framed with the words

'Hallelu jah' are in themselves a mini-Pentateuch of praise to God. The attention is resolutely taken off the human condition with its myriad interests and concerns and it is placed on the praise of God. In fact, the entry of humanity itself in Psalm 148, in the great praise chorus to God is relegated to the end portion of the Psalm. We are far from the centre of attention. Have you ever heard the sun, the moon and the stars praising God? Have you ever heard fire, hail, snow and frost praising God? Well then, you haven't been listening hard enough! What a delight this Spring to walk through the

woods very early in the morning and delight in the contrasting songs of the dawn chorus. The Chiffchaffs and the Willow Warblers really do praise God! If you haven't heard them you're missing something very special...

It is good for us to take our place beneath the rest of the created order that we might learn in humility. It's appropriate that this Psalm is read at Easter time by Christians for at its heart is the mission of God to reconcile all things under his Lordship. Paul wrote of the significance of the ministry of reconciliation and in Ephesians he declared

that all things are reconciled or united in Christ. The work of Christ should not be reduced to one particular view of the atonement. It is not exclusively about sacrifice nor is it exclusively about victory but it is most certainly about reconciling all things in himself. We are included in his reconciling embrace. The Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us; “Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” That sounds like a good outcome and is consistent with the objective of all creation which groans with anticipation for its reality.

C.S. Lewis wrote; “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.”¹ We have the privilege among all of creation to express it verbally and we should do so until our delight is complete.

William Henry Draper wrote his great hymn *All creatures of our God and King* exactly one hundred years ago based on the words of Francis of Assisi’s *Canticle of the Sun* which

¹ Lewis, C.S. 1958 *Reflections on the Psalms* London: Geoffrey Bles

was in turn inspired by Psalm 148. It contains a startling and stunning piece of theological writing in its sixth verse which is worth returning to.

“And you, most kind and gentle death,
waiting to hush our fading breath,
O praise him, alleluia!
You homeward lead the child of God,
and Christ our Lord the way has trod.”

The invitation here is to death itself to offer praise to God because death itself is only ultimately God’s servant. That is quite stunning and it comes directly from the way our Lord has trod. If Jesus had not gone there there would be no redemption and death along with everything else would not

have been reconciled to the all encompassing love of God.

Louis Albert Banks told the story of an elderly Christian man, a fine singer, who learned that he had cancer of the tongue and that surgery was required. In the hospital after everything was ready for the operation, the man said to the doctor, "Are you sure I will never sing again?" The surgeon found it difficult to answer his question. He simply shook his head, no. The patient then asked if he could sit up for a moment. "I've had many good times singing the praises of God," he said. "And now you tell me I can never sing

again. I have one song that will be my last. It will be of gratitude and praise to God." There in the doctor's presence the man sang softly the words of Isaac Watts' hymn, "I'll praise my Maker while I've breath,/ And when my voice is lost in death,/ Praise shall employ my nobler power;/ My days of praise shall ne'er be past,/ While life, and thought, and being last,/ Or immortality endures."

At a service in a Presbyterian church in Omaha in the United States people were given helium filled balloons and told to release them at some point in the service when they felt like expressing joy in their

hearts. Since they were Presbyterians, they weren't free to say "Hallelujah, Praise the Lord." All through the service balloons ascended, but when the service was over one third of the balloons were unreleased. The Psalm would say to us today; 'Let your balloon go.' Only you can do it. May you be inspired to praise the Lord! Amen.