

### Living the Word: Psalm 96

As this special night is finally upon us, the Psalm helps us to understand the song of the Angels, proclaiming the birth of the King of Kings. The sheer joy of the words in this Psalm is set against the context that the Lord of the whole earth is indeed worthy to be praised – and so we should do exactly that on this of all nights, when our salvation enters the world. That all nations are called to praise God in this Psalm is echoed in the host of Angels praising God to the astonishment of the Shepherds. It is all too easy for us to become parochial and defensive regarding the Faith, almost as if it is something we own simply for ourselves. This Psalm, and this night, remind us that God is the Lord of the whole world. Rejoice and be glad!

### Advent Traditions: Mass at Night

Given St Luke's account of the angels visit to the shepherds as they were 'abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night', the Lord's birth is traditionally supposed to have taken place in the night. The tradition of a midnight vigil on the eve of Christmas began in the East, and was observed in the late fourth century in Jerusalem on the night of 5th January: Christmas was then still celebrated on 6th January there as the Western date of 25th December had not yet reached the East. The tradition reached the Western world in the year 430 under Pope Sixtus III, in the Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome. By the 12th century, the practice of a midnight mass was much more common as priests were permitted to celebrate three Christmas masses: one in the night (today not necessarily at midnight), one at dawn, and one on Christmas Day. These have sometimes been held to represent the threefold birth of Christ: eternally in the bosom of the Father, from Our Lady's womb, and today in the souls of the faithful.

### From the Fathers

Awake, mankind! For your sake God has become man. Awake, you who sleep, rise up from the dead, and Christ will enlighten you. I tell you again: for your sake, God became man.

Let us joyfully celebrate the coming of our salvation and redemption. Let us celebrate the festive day on which he who is the great and eternal day came from the great and endless day of eternity into our own short day of time.

From 'Sermon 185' by St Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

24<sup>th</sup> December 2023

Christmas Day (Midnight Mass)



### Angels from the realms of glory

What poetry, song, art, drama, and film have been inspired by the Gospel of Midnight Mass! The story told by S. Luke is known, loved, and cherished by all generations and throughout every generation. This is not just because it is a powerful story but because it is true! It is Truth. It is not the moral truth of a fairy tale, folk story, or legend; it is of another order of truth. St Luke is careful to locate the events of his account of the nativity in human history, at a time and in a place ('when Quirinius was Governor of Syria', 'in Bethlehem of Judea'.) He does this intentionally so that we might see and know that the eternal, unseen God is invading the world in all its temporal and physical reality. This is a story that envelopes both heaven and earth, both God and Man, in the person of the incarnate Saviour Jesus Christ. In this historical event of eternal significance, human history reaches its climax; the incarnation is the fulcrum of all human history. Our carols help us to celebrate this wonderful event: every Gloria in excelsis we sing is a celebration of the one great Truth made real in this story– the Word is made flesh, God is with us. Gloria in excelsis Deo!

*St. Luke 2: 1-14*