

Sermon: Remembrance Sunday Service at Corbridge 2024

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen?
And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among those dark Satanic Mills?*

*Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!
I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land. William Blake*

In a few minutes we will sing William Blake's poem *Jerusalem*, wonderfully set to music by Sir Hubert Parry. It's extraordinary that verse 1 is a series of rhetorical questions demanding the answer 'No':

*And did those feet in ancient times walk upon England's mountains green – No.
And was the holy Lamb of God on England's pleasant pastures seen – No.
And did the countenance divine shine forth upon our clouded hills - No.
And was Jerusalem builded here among those dark Satanic mills? - No.*

Of course, Blake may have had in mind the old Glastonbury tradition that Jesus and Joseph of Arimathea visited England after the resurrection with the Holy Grail, the cup used by Jesus at the last Supper. But this is mere myth and legend.

What interests me about Blake's poem is how he uses the symbol of Jerusalem. Now Jerusalem means literally – 'City of Peace'. Our service began with the beautiful words of Psalm 122 which speak of the joy of pilgrims as they reach the City of Jerusalem and so can enter God's Temple, the house of the Lord. But the heart of the

Psalm is a heart-felt prayer – ‘O pray for the peace of Jerusalem’, the city of peace – ‘peace be within your walls and plenteousness, prosperity, in your palaces’. Because so many times Jerusalem was razed to the ground by war. And here in 2024 alas, Jerusalem is a place of war in the seemingly endless conflict with Hamas and Hezbollah that has plunged the Middle East into such darkness. But Blake is using the idea of an *idealised* Jerusalem – Jerusalem as a place of beauty and harmony, of peace and prosperity, of justice and equity, a Christ-like Jerusalem.

And as he looked on society in his day – the beginning of the 19th century, he asks – Have we built such a Jerusalem in England? And he must answer that with an emphatic ‘No’. Because in England we also have ‘dark, Satanic mills’. Now that reference to *mills* seems to reflect Blake’s negative view of the rapid growth of the Industrial Revolution, the factories and mills, belching out their smoke and grime, that sprang up amidst the ‘green and pleasant land’. But it seems that Blake saw a deeper meaning. Think of the word *mill-stone* – that was used for crushing and grinding wheat. It’s very possible that Blake understood ‘dark satanic mills’ as anything that grinds people down, that crushes their spirit, that denies their freedom or their dignity, or that wishes to subject them to brutal ideology or slavery or misery. Such things are *dark* – they bring fear and foreboding and they are *satanic* – evil, devilish. He seems to see his society as overcast by dark and threatening clouds and so his cry in verse 2 – ‘Bring me my spear, O clouds unfold’, to let in light.

So, if the answer is ‘no’ to all the rhetorical questions of verse 1, then verse 2 is a great clarion call to action. But Blake doesn’t say, ‘Bring me my trowel, cement mixer and stones to build Jerusalem in England’. Rather, we have the arresting imagery of a bow of burning gold, of arrows of desire, of a spear and chariot of fire. You see, the vision of building Jerusalem requires us to contend against the forces of darkness and oppression. Hence, Blake uses heroic images of warfare – but note for Blake this our *desire* or what we long for; he commends *mental* fight – the battle of ideas, that demolishes evil, corruption, false and wicked ideology. All that the fallen we commemorate today gave their lives to combat the wicked nationalism, racism, aggression and wickedness that lay at the root of both world wars and countless conflicts since. So, this year we remember particularly the D Day Landings, the Battle of Arnhem and the Battle of Kohima whose famous epitaph we heard – ‘When you go home, tell them of us, and say, For your tomorrow we gave our today’. And so, we pray for the courage, bravery and determination to seek to build Jerusalem, to contend for a world of beauty and harmony, of peace and prosperity, of justice and

equity. And of course, our Armed Services, as well as being ready to engage in armed conflict, also have a vital role in peace-keeping, protection, and as a deterrent, for which they need our support and prayers.

But we know that whatever our best endeavours, we have to recognise that the perversity of our human nature, our selfishness and greed, our sin and lawlessness, means that we fall short. That is why in our reading from the Book of Revelation, the Christian Prophet brings us the great vision of the ultimate *new* Jerusalem that will come down from heaven to earth, when there will be no more death, crying or pain, when God will wipe away every tear, and God will make all things new. And that includes the lives, the many young lives, that were given and taken away in their prime, as a perfected humanity is made new in God's eternal Kingdom. This is why this service is also a service of hope. But if that is our ultimate destiny, then we must anticipate it now. And so, we take up our bow, our arrows, our spear; we mount our chariot of fire, we fight mentally and with ardent desire to seek to build Jerusalem in our midst until the day of gladness dawns. Yes, verse one keeps demanding the answer 'no' but verse 2 is a great cry of 'Yes'. May we all shout 'Yes', and may God give us the will, desire and strength to build a better, more just, more peaceful, nation and world.