

Hymns: **167** “Colours of the day dawn into the mind”
 189 “Wild and lone the prophet’s voice”
 182 “On Jordan’s bank, the Baptist’s cry”
 177 “Lo, he comes with clouds descending”

Readings: **Isaiah 12:1-6**
 Luke 3:7-18

“A SOCIAL CONTRACT”

On Friday morning, at 4.45am to be precise, I drove two friends over to the Eurostar station at St Pancras. They were headed for Paris. They were attending a reception on Friday evening at the Trianon Palace – the one associated with Marie-Antoinette. And then, last evening (Saturday), there was a full-scale ceremony in the large palace – built by King Louis XIV, the palace of mirrors and light, the home of the “Sun King”.

The words “Social Contract” which I’ve included in my sermon title for today are a direct reference to a treatise written Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762. A quarter of a century before the French Revolution, he was writing about the need to challenge the idea of the divine rule of kings, the absolute powers of the monarch. He would have had Louis XIV in mind. The old regime was based on a tyranny – the despotic use of power wielded by the monarchy. Instead, Rousseau argued that there needed to be a sharing of power aimed at serving the common good. For him, the only sovereign that mattered, was the people. His “Social Contract” was printed just eight years after a previous piece of work which he’d entitled “Discourse on Inequality”. He argued that fundamental inequality between various groupings within the social order would inevitably lead to trouble. And yet, he argued, “all men are born free even though they find themselves in chains”. His writing was intended to rediscover the freedom with which we are born and which, he argued, represents our destiny.

Hold all that in your heads as I take a quick look over recent events. Last week began with those extraordinary utterances of Mr Trump. Was there ever a man with a more appropriate name? I just hope that this week’s outburst will be a case of the last Trump and that, in the twinkling of an eye, his words will be erased convincingly, and he shall be no more.

“You brood of vipers,” he shouted at the entire Muslim population. “The axe is laid to the root of your trees and they will be felled, cut down, kept out. And don’t tell me that you’re the children of Abraham and, therefore, somehow, entitled to special treatment. God can raise up stones and do a better job than you lot. So keep out. All of you. The Trump has sounded.”

The trouble is, as we caricature the ridiculous posturing of this truly dreadful man that we experienced a similar line of argument in Paris just a month ago. This time it

was Muslim militants putting their case not so much with words as with guns and bullets.

“You brood of vipers, “they screamed at people eating in cafes, dancing in a nightclub, walking on the street,” the axe (or the bomb) is laid at the root of your satanic, hedonistic, decadent, rotting trees. Don’t tell us that you westerners/Christians are children of Abraham and, therefore, somehow, entitled to special treatment. God can raise up stones and do a better job than you lot. All of you. Our bullets have made our point.”

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!

Worse than these extreme words or acts must surely be the way “ordinary people” are gathering around them, giving their support.

There are Muslim families in London and elsewhere whose children honour what they see as the valour of people fighting for Islamic causes and whose children slip away to Syria to fight.

And then just imagine Franklin Graham, son of the revered Billy Graham, stating his total agreement with Donald Trump! And there are so many others like him.

And so it’s time to let John the Baptist speak. Dear John the Baptist, England hath need of thee; thou shouldst be living at this hour; speak out, speak up, let the dead be raised to life. Let’s hear what you’ve got to say.

1. The “brood of vipers” in the original context are those who think that there’s a shortcut to the meaningful life; a cheap and cheerful way through the jungle of human misguidedness. They head off into the wilderness thinking that they’ll get some kind of magic solution, a palliative, a panacea.

And nothing could be further from the truth.

Repent - that’s John the Baptist’s word. Look into your hearts; see how you, yes you, contribute to the world’s ills; review your whole life; change tack. Do it. NOW. Before it’s too late.

Across the centuries he might well be saying: “get the agreement on climate change signed – well done for that! And get the priorities in your life sorted out. Well done for that too! But once you’ve made these decisions, make sure they bear fruit. Repentance isn’t about or fine intentions. It’s about fundamental change. There must be outcomes!”

2. And what might those outcomes be? John the Baptist tells us in a coherent and programmatic way what they might be. This is not a ranting and raving preacher, an end-of-the-world-is-nigh kind of speaker. He offers sound common sense.

In the area of human rights – he asks that food and clothing and basic entitlements (what we might sum up as Global Development Goals) should be

available to all. There must be a better distribution of the basic needs of people.

And then the question of fiscal arrangements – we must aim at a proper balance between rich and poor; it's no longer good enough that the huge divides separating the ultra-rich from the utterly poor can be tolerated. Capitalism is emptying itself of value as it energises these wicked inequalities.

And then finally he addresses the need for security – all that we put in place must serve the common good.

John the Baptist said NO to a world where people live in tents, see their children die of curable diseases, have hope crushed out of them. He says NO to a world where people needing financial support are described as scroungers or scavengers or parasites. He says NO where the strong ride roughshod over the weak or, in the name of national security, they slam doors, build fences, invade privacy, resort to torture, use bombs, and reduce whole towns to ashes.

3. And then comes the clincher. John the Baptist, the wonderful preacher and charismatic personality, isn't in it for himself. Let me repeat that. John the Baptist, who attracts the attention of thousands, isn't in it for himself. He's pointing away from himself to someone the thongs of whose sandals he says he's unfit to tie.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Social Contract" was written to challenge the divine right of kings and to assert the common good and the ordinary (sovereign) rights of the people.

Today, I'm sure he'd want to challenge the divine right of despots, tyrants, multi-millionaires, corporate giants, dictators, religious bigots, and (yes) celebrities. Too often, these are the evil spirits that have rushed in to occupy the space left by the all-conquering kings.

"I baptise with water," he says. "The one you must follow will baptise with the Holy Spirit." He's referring to Jesus. This is the Light of the world coming into the darkness and scattering it. This is the object of our hope. And this is the one who says now as then: "come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and you'll find that I will not slam the door in your face, nor suspect you of evil simply because you wear a beard or a scarf. Come to me and I will refresh you. Come to me, abide in me, and I'll abide in you.

And the thing to note is this. This Jesus whose love is unconditional, whose reach is immeasurable, whose grace is truly amazing he, and he alone, is the one who can raise up children of Abraham from the dusty and frigid people that we can sometimes be. He can warm us back into life. He can remind us of the destiny for which we were born. His energy and example, his teaching and his wisdom, and the cross (as proof of the totality of his love) are available to us now in this mortal life. He simply asks from us a response, a

commitment, a promise that we will do our best to go where he did, to do as he did, and to add value to the world in which we live. Just as he did.

That's today's Social Contract. I pray that we may be worthy of it and brave enough to accept its terms. Amen