

Hymns: 545 “Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart”
 549 “Come, let us use the grace divine”
 460 “Come, let us anew”
 564 “O thou who camest from above”

Readings: **Jeremiah 31:10-14**
 John 1:10-18

“CHILDREN OF GOD”

“War And Peace” – a phrase that sums up the world I’ve lived my entire life in. I was born during the Second World War and things have oscillated between those two poles throughout my life. *War and Peace* – the title of a novel by Leo Tolstoy, a piece of writing that’s been part of the life Margaret and I have lived together for the last 47 years. We took it with us on our honeymoon and devoured it. Three years later, whilst we were far away in Haiti, the BBC screened a televised version of this great epic. It took 20 episodes and it felt as if as much had been left out as was included. Anthony Hopkins played the lead role. Tonight, *War and Peace* will go on air again – only 6 episodes this time. No doubt it’s another victim of the age of austerity and cuts in public expenditure!

There’s a two-page, full colour spread of the main characters in this week’s *Radio Times*. The hope is that it will help us identify the large cast of people with complicated names. If we can do that, then we’ll start in style. To my mind, there are three main characters around whom the entire work revolves.

Pierre Bezukhov, the main character played this time round by Paul Dano, stands slightly off-centre. That’s appropriate for he’s an awkward, privileged, unattractive, short-sighted man, a bastard. He’s rich enough, independent enough, foolish enough to do anything he likes. And he does just that. Keep your eyes on him – don’t be fooled by an incestuous love scene which I’m certain Tolstoy never even dreamed of. Nor by more glamorous and heroic figures. This man is searching hard for meaning in life and trying bravely to figure things out.

Alas and alack! The other two principal characters (of my choosing) are not in that *Radio Times* photograph at all. I suspect they’re not going to feature in the series either. Even so, I must tell you about them.

Napoleon Bonaparte is one. His megalomania, self-belief, grand dreams, power him on. He wants the whole of Europe, the whole of Russia and, why not, the Americas too? He’s a little man from no-where. Yet he sets out to rescue France from the aftermath of its Revolution and self-inflicted chaos. He wants to give her back her pride. And he picks up a willing and rag-bag body of supporters who’ve been completely alienated by events in their native land. We know his bubble will burst. But when?

And *Mikhail Kutuzov* is the other - the superannuated former head of the Russian Army who's brought out of mothballs to face Napoleon as he approaches the Motherland. He's an old warrior who's become tired of the vanity of human life; he hates war and loves his soldiers. He's a humble, believing man. He makes the agonising decision to tempt Napoleon into battle at Borodino. He wants to give him a sense of victory and is prepared to sacrifice thousands of his own men to seduce him in this way. That way, he believes, he'll keep Napoleon sniffing at Moscow and on Russian soil until the winter comes.

History can never forget Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. Half a century after the event, Tchaikovsky certainly didn't. I can hear the cannon thumping, the trumpets in fanfare, as part of his famous 1812 Overture – surely the most dramatic piece of theme music ever.

So tonight it will be eyes down for a good watch. If any of you intend to have a crisis, please keep it till after 10pm! If you must have one earlier than that, then telephone Jennifer!

Why have I taken so much time to talk about tonight's programme? Because *War and Peace* is as much about today's world as about the early 19th century. Look around us and see how the conditions we're living in favour the emergence of a tyrant like Napoleon. Europe is beset with self-doubt. The UK may not be united for much longer. The USA is in danger of riding two horses pulling in different directions – isolationism on the economic front and imperialism in the political realm. The emerging economies are faltering. The Middle East is in total chaos, verging on melt-down. The planet is in danger of its life. The conditions are ripe for another Napoleon, a heroic worker of miracles, someone to fill us with optimism in these dark dark times. But we should always remember that optimism is not hope. We need another Kutuzov – someone who looks into the human soul, someone who sees the longer game, someone who recognises the sacrifices made now may well yield better outcomes later, someone who can have his hand on the levers of power without forgetting who he is, where he comes from, and what his debt is to the rest of humanity.

“Well, so what?” I hear some of you mutter. “You're a Christian preacher. You're standing in John Wesley's pulpit. And all you can talk about is a television show and some ancient Russians. What's all this leading to?”

I'll tell you where it's leading. *War and Peace* tells a story, it spells out a narrative, it speaks of the human heart, of human need, of human weakness. That's why it's so compelling, so contemporary. And if there's one thing the world is screaming and yearning for right now it's a narrative. Oh how we need life to be a tale told by a wise old man, full of grace and truth, signifying hopefulness.

And we Christians must learn from great writers and artists just how important it is to present our message as a narrative, a compelling narrative. It's time to put our disputes about doctrine, about sexual orientation, and the thoughts of past mistakes behind us and to remember what our whole enterprise is all about. We're here to tell a story. We're here to develop a narrative. We're here to bathe the world in Good News. No, that's not escapism or self-delusion or fantasy. St John spells it out and,

if we can catch his note, sense the rhythm of the tale he tells, get a whiff of the excitement with which he writes – then we'll understand that we Christians have the greatest narrative of them all and that it's time we got down to the business again of learning how to tell our story, to reach people with our story, to rescue people with our story.

We've lived through a period conveniently called "post-modern". The prevailing idea has been that there is no over-arching narrative, no story in which we can all take comfort, no account of things where we can find our identity. Each person makes up his own story and that's the end of things. I'm hoping that we've reached a time that I would call "post-post-modern." Where the need for a story emerges.

When Ed Miliband led the Labour Party to its defeat at the last General Election, he was accused of "no narrative" to present to the British public. And when Jeremy Corbyn was appointed as his successor, people jumped up and down (some for joy some for sorrow) because, they suggested, here was a man with a story to tell.

Just think for a minute about the story St John tells. And imagine the opening chords of Beethoven's 5th Symphony sounding forth between each of the following five interpellations. I've tried to marry opening verses of the book of Genesis with opening verses of St John's gospel. Here we go:

- In the beginning, God gave the Word and the heavens and the earth, day and night, light and darkness came into being. In the beginning was the Word.
- In the beginning, God gave the Word and, hey, water and dry land; sun, moon and stars; all took their place. And the Word was with God and the Word was God.
- In the beginning, God gave the Word and, lo, things started growing – trees and fruits and vegetables. All things came into being through God's word.
- In the beginning, God gave the Word and, blow the trumpets, there were living creatures – birds and fish and animals – to be seen here and there. Without God's word not one creature that was made came alive.
- In the beginning, God gave the Word and human life emerged, men and women in the very image of God. What has come into being through the Word is life itself.

And, get this, the Creative Word, Pure Reason, the all-powerful energy of God has somehow left the realm of abstraction, ceased to be the subject of philosophy, because it, the Word, has become flesh.

No-one has ever seen God but, in his Word made flesh, he has made himself known. We have beheld his glory. He has brought light into the world. He operates on the basis of grace and truth.

He is no Napoleon. Rather than accumulate power to himself or impress us with a display of his almighty gifts, he divests himself of power. He empties himself. He

assumes the form of a slave. Unlike the tyrants we know only too well, the only conquests he desires is over the human heart. The heart of God wishes to seek out the heart of his creatures and to beat in tune with it. *Cor ad cor loquitur*.

The trouble is that though he has entered our world, we have somehow not got to know him. Though he brought light into the world, we have preferred darkness. Though we could have met him as grace and truth, we have opted for disgrace and lies. We have too often chosen War rather than Peace. And in so doing, we've cut off our noses to spite our faces. For on offer has been a pure "democracy" of the spirit. It's:

- not just the least worse way of organising ourselves (as suggested by Winston Churchill);
- nor even simply, in the unforgettable words of Abraham Lincoln, something that is "of the people, by the people, for the people."

Opening ourselves to God's special offer grants us a full franchise. There is no property or age qualification. No gender, race or sexual orientation bar to meet. We simply have to take him into our hearts and open ourselves to the prompting of his spirit. Full fellowship with God is offered to all who receive him, who believe in his name. He has given the power to become children of God, nothing less, to such people. We may have been born of human parents. That's our biological origin. But now we'll know an even deeper lineage as we understand our identity as children of the King, of the King of kings.

It's with this King of kings, that we his children, make our covenant today. It's to him that we open our hearts. It's from him that we find our strength renewed. This is where our narrative begins.

I began this sermon by talking about the televised version of *War and Peace*. I could have begun with last night's programme on BBC2 – The Siege of Leningrad. We could have substituted Hitler for Napoleon. We could have shown how Hitler was raised up in the aftermath of the Germany's defeat in the First World War and the dreadful imposition of the punishment spelled out in the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler hated the fact that Slavs and Jews had so often replaced the old Teutonic Knights in Stalingrad. He set out deliberately to starve its 3.3 million citizens. In the end almost a third of these died of starvation. And during that dreadful three year period, it was the work of another artist, a musician this time, that alone maintained a sense of hope. The 7th symphony of Shostakovich was written during the siege and within the city. It was there that it got its first performance. Once again, the resilience of the human heart has been demonstrated in graphic form. A story to tell? Of course we have. We are engaged telling the story of God's kingdom, pointing to a better world. We announce that the darkness has never defeated the light however strong it may have seemed.

This is our story. Let's tell it. In our lives as well as in our words. Let that be our new year's resolution. May that be our covenant with Almighty God.

Amen.