

Hymns:     **368**    **“When morning gilds the skies”**  
              **154**    **“Come, divine interpreter”**  
              **248**    **“I heard the voice of Jesus say”**  
              **404**    **“Go, tell everyone”**

---

Readings:  **Philippians 3:17-4:1**  
              **Luke 13:31-35**

---

### ***“Jerusalem! Jerusalem!”***

From time to time, I take small groups of people on tours of the House of Lords. I always spend real time in my favourite room – the royal robing room. The whole place is decorated in the Gothic style down to its last detail. Dominating the space are five pictures, idealised representations, drawn from tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. These pictures convey the chivalric virtues, those wonderful qualities which, if only they could all be implemented, would make the country really worth living in. They are:

- Courtesy;
- Religion;
- Generosity;
- Mercy;
- Hospitality.

Wouldn't it have been wonderful if our Prime Minister had spent the last two or three weeks negotiating a reform of European Union treaties that would centre on these qualities?

It's obvious from the iconography of this room that Arthur is considered to be Britain's ideal king. Naturally, since he was Welsh, I puff my chest up with pride when I tell my visitors this.

And David was Israel's ideal king. Jerusalem was his capital city – he moved the court from Hebron early in his reign. David's kingdom was built on military victory over the 'Philistines'. The king was clearly a mighty warrior, as is reflected in the repeated refrain: "Saul (his predecessor) has killed his thousands, David his tens of thousands." As well as inflicting these defeats on an external enemy, he prevailed in a long and protracted civil war. The supporters of Saul did not leave the scene willingly. And, to cap it all, there was intrigue, treachery, incest, lust at the very heart of David's own family. He himself committed unutterable crimes. But he won all his battles in the end. Conquest led to peace; peace gave the nation some stability; and stability created a sense of well-being. The success of David's reign was sealed when his son Solomon built a massive Temple at the heart of Jerusalem and exercised his judgements with proverbial wisdom.

The word Jerusalem means “the city of peace”. That definition needs to be met with appropriate irony.

By the time of Jesus, Jerusalem had been defeated again and again. It had been overrun by enemy armies, its walls destroyed (and rebuilt), its population hauled off into exile. What price now the idea that Jerusalem was a city of peace?

It's no wonder to me that the reign of David began to acquire legendary status. That is, the reputation of David moved from the factual to the mythic. We begin to get an imagined golden age. I can just hear people say in times of trouble: “I wish King David were here, he'd have sorted all this mess out.”

Let me warn you about the doctrine of a golden age. We're going to have four months when people say over and over again just how simple and straight forward everything was before we joined the European Union; you can still hear people announce how the whole British population knew deep unity during the World War – that was the time to be alive; I hear people from this congregation whose lives began in one far flung country of British Empire of another complain when things are going wrong in the country of their birth. “It wasn't like that when the British were there...”

I used to sing a song that began “Jerusalem the Golden” when I began my childhood stint at Sunday School. Apart from the colour of some of its glorious domes, Jerusalem was never “golden”. But for Jesus, and for all Jews, there's no doubt that it was central to their lives, the key to the nation's administration and its spiritual direction. The Roman administration was headquartered there and the Temple dominated every aspect of the Jewish people's daily life. This was where power was to be found – religious and political. This was also where corruption, waste, weak leadership were to be found. This was where many a prophetic career was destroyed. If you spoke up against the powers that be then you must expect at best to be marginalised, at worst to be eliminated.

And yet... if you wanted to make a case, to persuade people of a different point of view, then you simply had to travel to Jerusalem to make it. It was the only place that offered you a platform for any radical strategy that you might want to propose.

And so Jesus set his face “like a flint” towards Jerusalem. He did so knowingly, self-aware, suffering no illusions. He knew the risk he was taking, that he'd be the latest to pay a heavy price for his outspokenness. But he knew that he had to go. Only there would the drama of his life reach its dénouement.

He would travel to Jerusalem and make the offer of a New Deal. He compared the offer he wanted to make to the action of a hen that would cover her chicks with her wings when a crisis arose. The hen might well be killed but the chicks could also be saved. He wanted to save the people from the fox (King Herod) and from the fire (the imminent destruction of Jerusalem). He knew that he must put the offer on the table. In Jerusalem. The City of Peace.

The Temple was destroyed by the Romans and the Jewish people were scattered to the winds. And that remained the case until the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Throughout the years of the diaspora there was real poignancy in the words

added to the Friday family prayers – “next year in Jerusalem”. But by now the very concept “Jerusalem” had come to mean something entirely different.

Our local sage is William Blake. His song called “Jerusalem” is sung here from time to time at weddings. Just listen to the first (of two) verse:

*And did those feet in ancient times  
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 these dark satanic mills?*

Oddly, in view of this morning's Gospel passage with its reference to Jerusalem as the place where the prophets meet an untimely end, Blake has written underneath this piece of verse a quotation from Numbers chapter 11 verse 29: “Would to God that all the Lord's people were prophets.”

Jerusalem was according to the Oslo Accords to become key to a two state solution for the Israel-Palestine problem. It's over 20 years since Oslo and nearly 50 since the occupation of the West Bank in 1967. And Jerusalem is being made more Jewish by the day. Settlements continue to be built, land is being bought up, so that the occupied territory and, significantly, East Jerusalem are becoming much more Jewish. The situation to be regulated by any peace accord is no longer what it was 50 years ago.

Well might we all wail “Jerusalem! Jerusalem!” in our day. Prophets of Jerusalem, those who remind the present-day Israeli leadership, of the demands of peace are likely to be given short shrift just as they always were.

Jerusalem is itself becoming a mirage, an image of itself, a projection into some apocalyptic reality. The Bible ends with the book of Revelation and its chapter 21 refers to a “New Jerusalem” where there will be no tears or suffering, no death or destruction, where all things will be sweetness and light. So Jerusalem has moved in the direction of the New Jerusalem and the problems to be solved for a suffering humanity are relegated to the “sweet bye and bye”.

How many hymns did we have in our older hymnbooks that treated Jerusalem in this way? Let me just quote from one:

*Jerusalem, my happy home,  
when shall I come to thee?  
When shall my sorrows have an end?  
And thy joys when shall I see?*

*Oh happy harbour of the saints  
oh sweet and pleasant soil  
in thee no sorrow may be found,*

*no grief, no care, no toil.*

This runs on for 11 verses! It's all the pappy stuff of fond imagining, all a delusion, a denial of the real needs of the actual Jerusalem.

Even Jews living in Jerusalem, are more and more focussed on a Jerusalem that doesn't exist than on the real one, the contested one. A Rabbi Agony Aunt in a Jewish publication was asked why people should end their prayer with the words "next year in Jerusalem" when they could either travel there now or even live there now? And this is how he answered that question:

"When we say 'next year in Jerusalem' we mean that all Jews should actually be in Israel and in Jerusalem (not as tourists!). We mean Jerusalem as it is ideally meant to be – with the Temple, the Sanhedrin and a Jewish Monarch. We're still waiting. Even we who live here in Jerusalem say 'next year in Jerusalem'".

Now there's the curse of religion for you. Not just the Jewish religion either. It refuses to deal with people's needs as they actually are, preferring a message that spells out "pie in the sky when we die".

Jesus did not see things that way. What he was offering was to be available in the here and now. He showed a different way. He argued his case, presented his views. He addressed the needs of those around him. But he paid the price for daring to do so. The Roman Administration and the Jewish hierarchy dealt with him. They disposed of him. So now it's up to us, his followers, to refuse to allow our faith to preoccupy itself with a fanciful hereafter. We must roll up our sleeves, accept the price we have to pay, and, in the name of our Lord, get on with doing our bit to make the world a better place.

That's our challenge.