

Hymns: **171** **“Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes”**
 166 **“the third is for the Baptist”**
 395 **“Spirit of the living God”**
 188 **“There’s a light upon the mountains”**
 167 **“So light up the fire and let the flame burn”**

Readings: **Isaiah 35:1-10**
 Matthew 11:2-11

“VENGEANCE AND RETRIBUTION”

It’s the time of the year – the bleak midwinter – when our thoughts begin to turn to summer delights. The travel brochures are plopping on the doormat and, though we still have to negotiate the Christmas celebrations, curiosity will drive us to turn their pages and begin to thumb through them.

Ah! Those photographs. From the way these pages offer their lovely packages, we could expect that every day of our holiday will be a sunny day, every advertised place will offer a fulfilment for our dreams. We can look at Shangri-La. And our spirits will soar in anticipation of summer bliss.

The thirty fifth chapter of Isaiah might have been written by a travel agent. Three thousand years ago, of course, there were no cameras or computers so the prophet had to resort to “word pictures”. He describes deserts bursting into flowers, glorious wooded hillsides, everyone with a smile on their face, luxury on all hands. Terrorists can’t invade this space. People will be free to do what they like. All that - and then the concluding words of the chapter: “Let suffering and weariness flee away, everything will offer sheer delight and everlasting joy.”

Clearly the place to go! But hold on. There must be a snag. Well, yes, there is a snag. In fact, two snags!

So what exactly are they?

Firstly: this chapter is a “hard sell” to a demoralised bunch of people. They’ve suffered a military defeat and are languishing in terrible anguish. So the piece is written to keep their spirits up, to re-energise them, to re-focus them on a more hopeful future. After all, they were only in this dark place because of their own crass stupidity.

Where exactly?

Syria. Yes – I know you’ve heard of Syria. The same place where Russian-backed armies are to be found this very day. Then (as now) there was a huge displacement of people fleeing before the Assyrian army. Thousands were deported from their

native Israel into captivity across the border. No wonder they were down in the dumps.

So that's the first snag. It was written deliberately to cheer people up.

This propaganda piece was spoken/written to shake them out of their stupor. A bit like Satan re-energising his fallen angels in the pit of hell as described by John Milton in the first book of Paradise Lost.

And secondly: God, the same God who sentenced them to this miserable exile, is now going to strike again. In the first instance, displeased with the way his people were responding to him in their daily lives and the way they organised their country, he suffered them to endure defeat and banishment. So, is he now going to strike again – to save his people, to put an end to their humiliation. If so, how exactly?

Through “vengeance and retribution”. This is the only “blip” in the whole of Isaiah 35. God, it seems, is going to get his own back on the wicked Assyrians. His people will be set free. It will be another Exodus. Not the Red Sea this time. But a causeway, the Way of Holiness. This is a road that people with clean hands and ordered lives will walk over to safety in the Promise Land.

So every picture tells a tale, snags and all. But behind every tale lurk inconvenient facts which so often lie in wait to ensnare the reader. From the holiday brochure it's the fact that the villa you admire may have been built in an earthquake zone or a flood plain. Or perhaps next to a soap factory. Or at the end of a road you can only drive over in a four-wheel drive vehicle. The first glance impression of the ideal home may need a closer scrutiny.

Vengeance and retribution lie in wait. The people need to be challenged in a radical manner.

Margaret (my wife) looks after Thomas on Thursday afternoons. He's not yet seven years old but he's begun to read on his own. Margaret was astonished to discover last Thursday that he's deep into “Gulliver's Travels”. Now that's a lovely story and has intrigued children down the ages. But it's more than simply a “lovely story”. Underneath, there's a lot going on. Just think.

Gulliver visited Lilliput. It was full of little people. Our world is full of little people. They have small agendas. There's a swirl of gossip. They seem contented with their petty quarrels and squabbles. They argue over whether it is more “correct” to open a boiled egg from its big end rather than its little end. Or to put the milk in their tea before the tea is poured or after it. These little people with tiny minds, once they work out that Gulliver is strong and mighty of muscle, seek to engage him in subjugating a neighbouring territory. A bit like Russia annexing Crimea or the Ukraine. A bit like imperial armies in all time and space.

Gulliver escapes to Brobdingnag. Here is a kingdom devoted to the art of mathematics and astronomy. The scientific method was in full sway in Swift's day and science was being spoken of as the key to human progress. So, armed with these new tools and understandings, what did the citizens of this place spend their

time doing? Why, extracting sunbeams from cucumbers of course! Softening marble for use as pillows. Uncovering political conspiracies by examining the excrement of suspicious people. What an abuse of science! Here were learned people with tiny minds, unable to see the way their knowledge needed to be used creatively for the common good. Satisfied with ridiculous outcomes.

Whilst in Brobdingnag, Gulliver made a side trip to Luggnagg where he met the inhabitants, known as the Struldbrugs. This group of people had somehow managed to become immortal. There was no death for them. But nor was there a continuation of youth. This situation generated so many ancient people that no-one knew what to do with them. So they were declared legally dead at the age of 80 and air-brushed out of public concern. Does that sound familiar?

And finally, Gulliver visited the land of the Houyhnhnms where he found the humanoids who looked very much like men and women but who were entirely “hideous, deformed, and savage.” Indeed, the collective noun for these humanoids was (wait for it) Yahoos. They abused nature and were generally disordered. Indeed, within their society, it was the horses that taught sense. Gulliver preferred to find a way of talking to the horses than to deal with those dreadful human-shaped creatures.

Jonathan Swift, the author of Gulliver’s travels, painted a gloomy picture of human nature where he identified the apparently instinctual drive towards self-destruction. He wondered whether this was a consequence of natural selection, the need to survive, at all costs. We might ask whether there is such a thing as “original sin”?

John Wesley’s sermon number 44 is on the subject of Original Sin and it begins with a text from Genesis 6:5: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination in the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

Throughout my ministry, I’ve been so wedded to a belief in progress, to the inevitability of economic growth, to the notion of human perfectibility, that I’ve tended to poo-poo the idea of Original Sin. Until now.

The way our post-truth, post-common-sense world is today, I think it may be time to re-visit the idea that since the moment of our conception we are driven towards self-centredness. Perhaps in our need to survive. Perhaps this is the practical outworking of what the scientists call “natural selection”. Whatever it is, it certainly leads us into all kinds of difficulty.

John Milton’s opening lines in his great epic Paradise Lost run like this:

*Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe;
With loss of Eden, till one greater man
Restore us and gain the blissful seat,
Sing heavenly muse..... Thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread,*

*Dove-like satst brooding on the vast abyss
And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support,
That to the heighth of this great argument
I may assert eternal providence
And justify the ways of God to men.*

There we have the notion of Original Sin, a consequence of the fall of humanity, driven by some instinctual drive towards satisfying unmeetable urges. And also the need for some other way ("one greater man") out of this mess.

John the Baptist was confused. He'd preached about Jesus as someone whose sandals he (John the Baptist) was not worthy to untie. But then, when Jesus sets about his ministry, he doesn't seem able any longer to recognise Jesus for what he is. He sends his friends to find out what's happening. And Jesus sends a direct message back to him. You've been looking for the wrong kind of person. The answer to your nagging questions, your neurotic self-doubt, your pathological anxiety, will need you to look NOT at someone living in luxury (like Trump Tower), NOT a celebrity or a reality character from programmes like Apprentice, NOT someone who courts popularity, seeks to win admiration from the masses, NOT someone who dresses in the latest fashion. None of these things. You'll find him disfigured and without form; it's by his stripes that we are healed. It's through service that he accomplishes his will. His sermons are rooted in radical action. He addresses constantly the needs of the poor. "You go and tell John the Baptist that," he orders his questioners. "Remind him of his own sermons. Show him what I've been doing."

He also indicates that if we want some of what he's about, then repentance is necessary. We must stop in our tracks. We must think hard. We must reflect deeply. We must see how we are being driven by our own anxieties. And it's important, vital, that we find a way to trust what we see in Jesus who, at a stroke, could spring us out of the endless cycle of subservience to our nature and biological conditioning and into a new freedom that will offer greater strength as a consequence of helping and serving each other in our daily lives.

So we are to love God. And love our neighbour. And to do to others what we'd have them do to us. And to avoid doing to others what we wouldn't want them to do to us.

Only in this way, can we get out of the rat-race. And we must do that before it's too late.

God help us in our search and on our journey.

Amen.