

Last Monday morning,

when it was yet dark,

Arlene Foster's dulcet tones disturbed my slumbers.

I was relieved to find she was being interviewed

on Radio Four's Today

rather than lying on the pillow beside me,

but it made for a very scary moment.

It took me back to Ian Paisley's heyday in the 1970s

when he was ranting and raving

in his Belfast pulpit:

'Papists will go to Hell.

Sodomites will go to Hell.

Sluts will go to Hell.

Abortionists will go to Hell.

The IRA will go to Hell.'

He made Hell sound like one fun party.

But a little boy in the congregation, absolutely terrified
by Paisley's red-faced fulminations from the pulpit
whispered,

'Mum, what on earth shall we do if that man
escapes from that box?'

Of course, John the Baptist did escape from the box,
preaching fierce sermons in pop-up pulpits
throughout the wilderness of Judea
and on the muddy banks of the Jordan.

'You vipers' brood,'
he shrieks at the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Today he'd be shrieking that
at the House of Bishops, at the House of Commons,
at Prince Andrew.

The Ian Paisley of Palestine.

His protégé was his cousin
six months his junior,
but both born out of time.

A northerner,
a carpenter, patiently planing and sanding,
gently going with, rather than against the grain,
no camel's hair shirt, no red-faced shouting.

Clearly John didn't think
that John-the-Baptist-Junior was up to it,
smuggling out a message from his dungeon cell:
'Are you really the one who should come,
or are we to look for another?'

As we look for another,
another PM, another vicar,
the gentle carpenter's reply should focus our minds:

'The blind receive their sight,
the lame walk,
the lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear,
the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them.
And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

Just 38 words

compared to the 3072 words in our Parish Profile,
aka job description to be the gentle carpenter's servant.

Every word of Jesus is worth a hundred of ours.

The blind receive their sight.

River blindness, cataracts, trachoma

still blight the sight of so many in the developing world.

Can we give them the gift of light this Christmas
as we mark the birth of the Light of the World?

And none so blind as those who will not see.

Dare we open their eyes and our eyes
to rejoice in the light rather than delve in darkness?

Dare we stop turning a deaf ear to the cries of others,
babies and adults crying in our dark world's trouble spots?

The lame walk.

God bless our NHS, and all doctors and nurses
who put their lives on the line in the developing world
to banish the crippling diseases of our yesteryear.

Truth is though, we're all limping.

We may walk straight on the outside,
but we're twisted up on the inside
and so need a crutch, Christ's crutch.

The lepers are cleansed.

We've banished smallpox from the planet.

With the same will we can banish leprosy.

But also touch the untouchables,

cast in those cast out by the world.

An inclusive church is actually a tautology.

We are either inclusive

or we have no right whatsoever

to call ourselves Christ's Church.

The dead are raised.

Goodness, that's going a bit far.

Except that resurrection is at our heart.

Nothing in all creation should separate us

from the love of God

in Christ our Lord, resurrected from the dead.

Never mind Arlene Foster,
when you wake up in a morning think,
Where will God's Easter dawn in my life today?
Can we raise up his kingdom on earth?
Whatever is true, whatever is noble,
whatever is right, whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable
if anything is excellent or praiseworthy,
think about such things.
And do them!

The poor have good news brought to them.
God bless Food Banks!
God bless every church which feeds its flock
on Christ the true bread,
the Bread of Life.

God bless every church
that says to whatever government,
'You Vipers Brood, that it should come to Food Banks!'

Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.

Don't sell Christ short,

do not say,

'I do not know this man of whom you speak,'

don't apologise for your faith

in the gentle carpenter

who made the blind see

and the deaf hear

and the lame walk

and cleansed the lepers

and hugged the poor

and raised the dead.

Yes,

I do know this man of whom you speak,
the most marvellous man in the history of the world.

Wow, if we had a vicar with that 38 word manifesto,
if we had a church with that 38 word manifesto,
if we had a government with that 38 word manifesto,
what a wonderful world it would be.

Oh yeh!

Some words from

Lord, I was afraid written by Nigel Balchin in 1947 ,

who was clearly disaffected

by causes, creeds and the tub-thumping certainties

of those who knew exactly where they were going in life:

‘We stood at a cross road of time,

with all the signposts down.

We saw error and ignorance and prejudice and stupidity
go marching boldly down the roads

away from somewhere and towards anywhere.

The bands were playing and the flags flying.

It would have been easy to follow.

But we stood there,

fumbling for our lost compass and our missing map –

waiting for the stars to come out and give us a bearing;

waiting until it was light.’