

Cyrus the Great, king of Persia 560-530 BC,
ruled over the greatest empire the world had ever known,
His raised-up limestone tomb

is a world heritage site

at Pasargadae north east of Shiraz in Iran

The tomb of the greatest emperor the world has ever known
has been targeted for destruction by Donald Trump,
the greatest idiot the world has ever known.

Though capable of being as brutal as a Hitler or Stalin,
once he had established an empire
which ran from the Mediterranean to the Indus river,
Cyrus exercised a chiefly benign rule.

He allowed conquered lands
to retain their customs and religions,
and in his Cyrus Cylinder
established the first bill of human rights.

Which is where today's reading from Isaiah comes in.

Isaiah spends 15 chapters celebrating Cyrus,

describing him as the Lord's servant,

his anointed his Mossiach, his Messiah.

A list of accolades which are astonishing

when Jews normally described foreigners

as Gentile dogs.

But the flattery is not surprising in that

Cyrus' two Edicts of Restoration allowed the Jews

exiled and enslaved by the waters of Babylon,

to return to and rebuild their native land.

I suspect Cyrus did it to cheese off

all the other nations in the Middle East,

which after all has basically been

UK and US foreign policy for the last century.

Strangely Cyrus never ventured into Egypt.

Perhaps he had heard of all the plagues

and slaughter of first born

and Red Sea tsunamis

that the God of Israel had visited upon them

and decided to give the place a wide berth.

As well as realising the Jews

were not a people to mess with.

Oh Jeremy Corbyn!

But whatever,

Isaiah's hope is that the returning Jews

will model themselves on their liberator,

and be a light to the nations,

opening eyes and liberating the oppressed:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light
My chains fell off, my heart was free
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee

Fat chance.

Instead the Jews returned from exile
and squandered all their precious resources
walling themselves in
and cruelly casting out 'foreign wives'
anyone deemed to be tainted with foreign blood.
That must make us feel very superior,
we who have voted for Brexit
and scape-goated immigrants.

They had to wait 500 years for the baptism, the anointing
of the one, the Mossiach in whom God's soul delights,
who will bring forth justice to the nations
who will not cry or lift up his voice,
who will not break a bruised reed
or quench a dimly burning wick.

The one who weeps over Jerusalem and cries
'If only you had known, even now,
the way that leads to peace.'

500 years is a long time to wait.

But we've had the Prince of Peace in our midst
for four times that.

Peace upon earth!" was said. We sing it,

And pay a million priests to bring it.

After two thousand years of mass

We've got as far as poison-gas.

Thomas Hardy's sharp little poem from 1924
following Winston Churchill's gas attacks in Iraq,
never fails to bring me up short,
putting my forty years' priesthood
and two thousand years
of the Church's priesthood
to utter shame.

His Christmas Ghost Story,
set 25 years before during the Boer War
stars a dead soldier mouldering in his Transvaal grave
complaining

I would know

By whom and when the All-Earth-gladdening Law

Of peace, brought in by that Man Crucified,

Was ruled to be inept, and set aside?

Hardy balks at ignoring

the message of the Prince of Peace, the one who said

‘Love your enemy, do good to those who hate you.’

That Sermon on the Mount

was lived out in extremis as

he says in the Garden of Gethsemane

‘Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword,’

And he says as his enemies nail him up,

‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.’

I began at Theological College

in the autumn of 1978,

following the eleventh Lambeth Conference.

Resolution Five made me feel that the Anglican Church

was a church I really wanted to put my name to

and my life to:

‘Affirming again the statement of
the Lambeth Conferences
of 1930, 1948 and 1968 that
"war as a method of settling international disputes
is incompatible with the teaching and example
of our Lord Jesus Christ,"
the Conference expresses its deep grief
at the great suffering
being endured in many parts of the world
because of violence and oppression.

We further declare
that the use of the modern technology of war
is the most striking example of corporate sin
and the prostitution of God's gifts.’

By whom and when
was that ruled inept and set aside?

After so much Thomas Hardy
I end with some R S Thomas,
the greatest saint
the Church in Wales never had,
to cheer you up a bit.
He's attending a concert at Cardiff,
never his favourite city!

A memory of Kreisler once:

At some recital in this same city,

The seats all taken, I found myself pushed

On to the stage with a few others,

So near that I could see the toil

Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth

Fluttering under the fine skin,

And the indelible veins of his smooth brow.

*I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,
Caught temporarily in art's neurosis,
As we sat there or warmly applauded
This player who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.
So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
Making such music as lives still.
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.*

Christ plays the same tune,
from Jordan through to Calvary and beyond,

beautifully humble, beautifully suffering,
beautifully drawing the sting of evil and violence.

Not an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,
but Christ for an eye, Christ for a tooth.

‘This is my son, my beloved,
with who I am well pleased.

Listen to him.’

God bless you with his heartfelt listening
as we move on from Christmas and Epiphany
and remind ourselves of the works and words of Jesus.

We need to listen
and remind our leaders in Church and state to listen
and listen well,
as are recalled once again to play ourselves into Christ
and be baptised with the baptism he was baptised with.

