

Trinity XIII Evensong 2019

I woke in the middle of the night recently with the words of the Nightmare Song from Iolanthe running through my mind:

*When you're lying awake with a dismal headache, and repose is taboo'd by anxiety,
I conceive you may use any language you choose to indulge in, without impropriety;
For your brain is on fire and the bedclothes conspire of your usual slumber to plunder you:
First your counterpane goes, and uncovers your toes, and your sheet slips demurely from under you;*

I wonder if the current Lord Chancellor has similar nightmares. His nightmares might not relate to falling in love with wards of court! Then, in the darkness, something else came to mind. I once saw the film 'The Matrix.' Released twenty years ago, it is described on Wikipedia – that beacon of cyber knowledge – as belonging to a cyberpunk subgenre of science fiction. The plot revolves around the premise that most of humanity has become locked into a simulated reality by intelligent machines who are using humans as a bio-electrical power source. Could this be the answer to the state of our current political and national paralysis? It would be funny, if it weren't so serious. Many like me will be profoundly depressed by the name calling from all sides, which is leading to such division and ill-will. Healing will take all our energy to achieve, and I think that both readings can inform this task.

The first part of the passage we heard from the prophet Isaiah is familiar to us as a carol service reading, and the whole chapter is one which almost seems to bathe us in the golden glow of the future promise of God's glory which shall be revealed through a transformed Israel. Although darkness covers the earth, the redeemed community will be a beacon of light to all who draw near in faith. There is no universalism within this passage; light and brightness come to other nations and kings by way of Israel.

In the original Hebrew, this chapter is a lengthy poem, and if you read it through, the penny drops in understanding that Zion (Jerusalem) is portrayed as a bereaved woman. There is little sense in the historical return of the Children of Israel from exile in Babylon, because it is likely that this passage was written after Cyrus the Great had destroyed the power of Babylon and the return to Zion had actually proved to be a disappointment.

Our Faith sees in this passage the possibility of the future glory of humanity's unity with God revealed in the face of Jesus as Messiah, but one where even the concept of Messiahship is turned upside-down. In fact the next chapter of Isaiah which flows on from where we left off, is used by Jesus himself as a touchstone of his own ministry, as well as a powerful reminder of **our** call to allowing the Spirit to abide in all that we do. *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.*

Turning from the sunlit hills of this radiant passage, so to speak, we see something darker in the reading from John. If you heard my sermon last week, you will know that this very text

came to mind when I was tackling the Gospel reading in which Jesus talks of division in terms of Faith.

It is best to remember that the passage from John is part of a cycle within the Gospel which starts with the feeding of the 5,000. The Lord has fed this crowd and consequently they want to make him king. He withdraws but they are portrayed as almost stalking him, so drawn are they to his ministry. John gives us to understand that this is because they understand that they have been fed by: *'The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. (John 6:33)*

We then have one of the great *I am* sayings upon which the theology of the Gospel hangs: *'I am the bread of life. Whoever come to me will never be thirsty, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'* (6: 35) He talks of the life which is to be found in God through faith in him, before moving, as questions start to be asked by the pharisees, into the passage this evening.

First, he reiterates what he has said: *'I am the bread of life,'* and then, *'I am the living bread that came down from heaven.'* (6: 49 & 51) before a theological elaboration which seems intent of scandalising his company. He speaks of flesh and blood, and the fact that unless people seeking to following him eat his flesh (and the Greek word almost implies chewing) and drink his blood, they will not be part of the transformation of the world which is at the heart of our Faith. In fact what the jarring nature of this imagery seeks to point out the way in which the true path of following Christ involves our ingesting into our very being the self-giving grace revealed in the cross - the exemplar for our own journey in revealing this same love in all our dealings. It's a tough job.

As people turn away, Jesus asks the twelve if they are too are put off by what they will face if they follow him. Peter's words are surely echoed by anyone who seeks to follow Christ now: *'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'*

There is nothing wishy-washy about the Christian Faith. Think of our brothers and sisters in Christ in the Middle East; China or North Korea; Turkey or Nigeria. In their trials and persecutions, they will tell you how much they have come to believe and know that Jesus is the Holy One of God. This sustains then no matter what. As never before, the West too needs this message of transformation. The sucking out of Faith, the pouring of scorn on it at every twitch and turn by the organs of state and media leaves our society with what? Nothing better, that's for sure.

Our Faith is not some bolt-on extra to everyday life, but revolutionary in its message of a constant exploration of **new** life here and now – an exploration of every facet of life in the knowledge of the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. Although I started this sermon with some sense of levity, the truth is that Christianity is the answer to the problems existing within both public and private life. Our Faith is a call to not just our own transformation but enabling as members of the Body of Christ to draw all we meet to know the fulness of life found in Jesus, the Bread of Life.

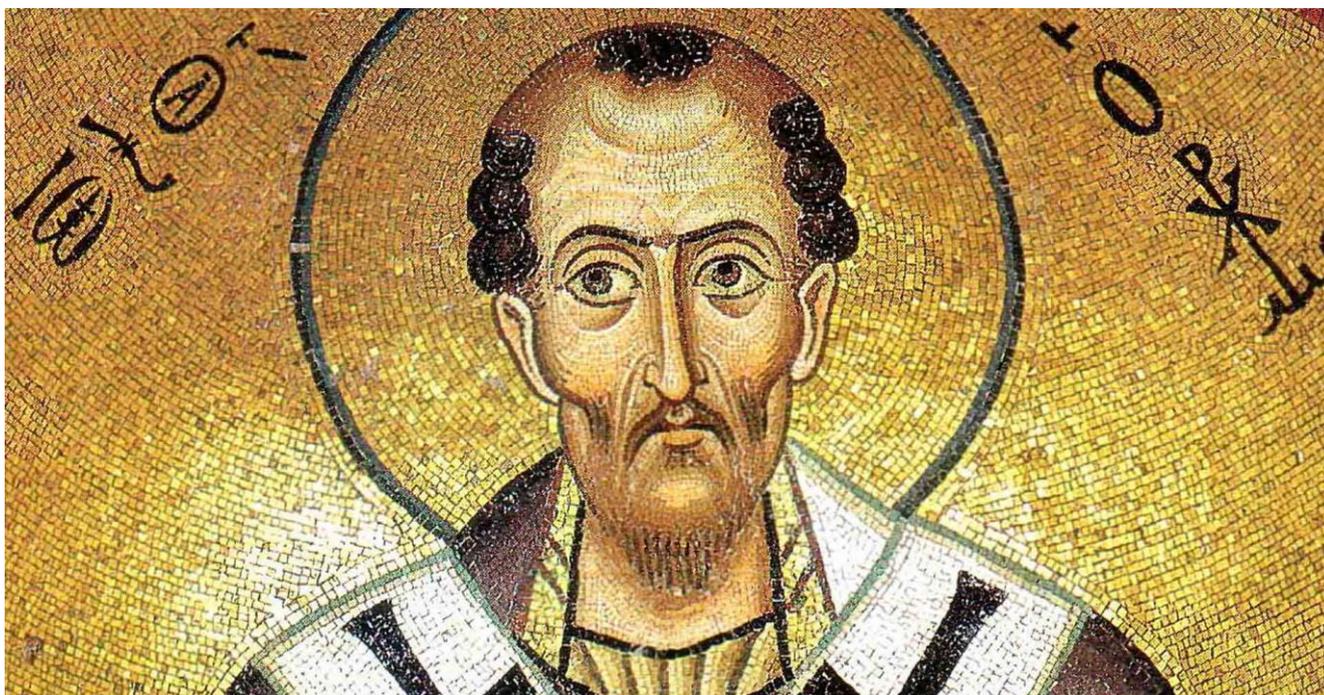
Friday was the Feast of St John Chrysostom – the third century Archbishop of Constantinople - whose preaching was so powerful that people gave him the name ‘Golden-mouthed - Chrysostom.’ He was sent into exile after speaking out against materialism and luxury, corruption and misuse of power, and falling foul of the Empress Eudoxia. In his farewell sermon he said this:

Numerous are the waves, and great the tossing of the sea, but we have no fear of going down, for we stand upon the rock. Let the ocean rage as it will, it is powerless to break the rock. Let the waves roll, they cannot sink the bark of Jesus. Tell me, what should we fear? Death? To me to live is Christ and to die gain. Is it exile perchance? The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness of it. Is it confiscation of property? We brought nothing with us into the world, and it is clear that we can take no thing away with us. I despise what the world fears, and hold its good things in derision. I do not fear poverty, nor do I desire riches. I am not afraid of death.

I hold His written word. This is my staff, this is my courage, this is to me a calm harbour. Even if the world be troubled, I hold that written word; I look up to those words, they are a wall of strength to me. What are they? I am with you always until the consummation of the world. Christ is with me, what shall I fear? If waves are raging against me, and the fountains of the deep and the passions of princes, all these things are more insignificant than a cobweb. I always say, Lord, may Thy will be done; not what this person or that person wishes, but what you will. This is my tower of defence, this is my immutable rock, this is my sure staff.

Powerful words, and the sense of powerful mission. Regardless of our stance in the current political impasse, WE are called to bring Christ into the situation, called to bring healing to the brokenness both of this situation, of further societal problems and indeed of our own failings.

In Christ, all have the possibility to know the radiance of God’s love for them. No ‘ifs,’ no ‘buts.’ **Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.**



Isaiah 60

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ² For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³ Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴ Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. ⁷ All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house. ⁸ Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows? ⁹ For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has glorified you. ¹⁰ Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I struck you down, but in my favour I have had mercy on you. ¹¹ Your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut, so that nations shall bring you their wealth, with their kings led in procession. ¹² For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste. ¹³ The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will glorify where my feet rest. ¹⁴ The descendants of those who oppressed you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet; they shall call you the City of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel. ¹⁵ Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, with no one passing through, I will make you majestic for ever, a joy from age to age. ¹⁶ You shall suck the milk of nations, you shall suck the breasts of kings; and you shall know that I, the Lord, am your Saviour and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. ¹⁷ Instead of bronze I will bring gold, instead of iron I will bring silver; instead of wood, bronze, instead of stones, iron. I will appoint Peace as your overseer and Righteousness as your taskmaster. ¹⁸ Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise. ¹⁹ The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night;^[B] but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. ²⁰ Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended. ²¹ Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land for ever. They are the shoot that I planted, the work of my hands, so that I might be glorified. ²² The least of them shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am the Lord; in its time I will accomplish it quickly.

John 6: 51-69

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵ for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.' ⁵⁹ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' ⁶¹ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'