The meaning of Blake's 'Jerusalem'

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 those dark satanic mills ?

Bring me my bow of burning gold
Bring me my arrows of desire !
Bring me my spear ! O clouds, unfold !
Bring me my chariot of fire !
I will not cease from mental fight,
nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
till we have built Jerusalem
in England's green and pleasant land

The more you know about William Blake the better you will understand the rashness of the title I have given this article. The verses referred to are so full of possible classical and biblical allusions that to fix a hard and fast meaning is well-nigh impossible. Nor would Blake, essentially a visionary poet, necessarily want there to be one. The best one can do is to trace a way through what is written to find as coherent a view as can be shaped.

The first point to be clarified is that the title for the poem we know as 'Jerusalem' is a misnomer.

The only poem Blake wrote called 'Jerusalem' is a huge epic in four chapters which I have no intention of getting involved with here. The verses we know form a prefatory poem to another symbolic epic, 'Milton', where the spirit of the earlier famous English poet is evoked. It's subject is the awakening of the imagination and it is this concept which may prove helpful in understanding the shorter poem we are concerned with.

This poem, neglected for a century or so after it was written (1803/04 ?), came into prominence when Sir Hubert Parry was asked to set it to music, in 1916, to help boost flagging morale during the First World War. It has since been sung at Labour, Conservative and Lib Dem Party Conferences, at gatherings of the Women's Institute, at Rugby and in recent years at Test Cricket matches (much deplored by former England captain, Mike Brearley) to mention only a few. It is, of course, sung in churches, this week at the royal wedding and often as a recessional hymn, even though, as it is not a prayer to God, it is not technically a hymn at all.

As a poem, 'Jerusalem' (which we will still call it) falls into two parts, each with two verse of four lines. The first two verses are made up of four questions, the second two of a set of imperatives ('Bring me....') and then of a determination to act ('I will not cease.....'). The opening question relates to the legend that a young Jesus came to the land now known as south west England in the company of his (great ?) uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, and visited the area around Glastonbury where he may, or may not, have founded a church. This legend is linked to the Book of Revelation describing a second coming and the foundation of a new Jerusalem.

The opening 'And' wonderfully catches a sense of expectation and astonishment - the question might suggest doubt but the implied answer is 'Yes'. The 'feet' are those of Jesus - they touchingly suggest his humanity without compromising his divinity. Lovers of Handel's 'Messiah' or Isaiah in scripture might recall the prophecy, 'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet...' . 'In ancient time' perfectly captures the stuff of legend in its delicate imprecision. 'England's mountains green' suggests an idealised landscape, continued in the easy alliteration of 'pleasant pastures'. The 'Lamb of God' naturally inhabits these pastures in innocent delight (see Blake's poem 'The Lamb', in Songs of Innocence) but we cannot ignore the image of Christ as sacrificial victim.

The 'countenance divine' is clearly that of God, imaged as the sun, striving to penetrate through our 'clouded hills' with the light of revelation. What is revealed is the possibility of Jerusalem, the ideal city, in the words of one commentator, 'the symbolic residence of a humanity

freed of the inter-related chains of commerce, British imperialism and war' - quite a distance from the common patriotic reading of the poem ! (A possibly relevant biographical note here: Blake was arrested on a charge of treason in 1803 for his outspoken support of the French Revolution, but eventually aquitted)

The 'dark Satanic mills' have usually been interpreted as the blight of the industrial age. Blake would have known the Albion Flour Mills on the south bank of the Thames which, with their steam-powered engines, were driving traditional millers out of business. They were burnt down, perhaps deliberately, in1791. An additional irony is provided by the name, Albion, often used by Blake as a synonym for England. On the other hand these mills have been seen as emblematic of the churches of the day, going on Blake's known antipathy to established religion.

'How the chimney-sweepers cry

Every blackening church appalls'

states his searing poem 'London' in Songs of Experience. Perhaps more persuasively, these mills are

denotative of mental and spiritual captivity, mechanical operations of the mind when the imagination is enslaved, an idea which will be taken up in the second part of the poem.

The first part of the poem reaches it's climax here, in the possible reality of a former Jerusalem existing, as anyone who has sung Parry's tune will realise. The composer evidently recognised the change in the affirmation with the emphasis he affords the first word 'Bring' in the third verse. Now the imagery becomes more dramatic and uncompromising, thrillingly metaphorical. The 'bow of burning gold' suggests that of Apollo, classically known as the sun-god and the god of poetry who is thus continuing the work of the 'countenance divine' earlier. If we are to read 'me' as referring to Blake himself then he, as poet, is in the front line of action. 'Arrows of desire' might recall the archer Eros, the god of love (otherwise known as Cupid), whose arrows would incite feelings of desire in whomsoever they struck. Again, this is entirely in keeping with Blake's outlook which is fiercely resistant to all forms of repression. As the 'Garden of Love' from Songs of Experience bitingly concludes :

'And priests in black gowns

were walking their rounds

And binding with briars

my joys and desires'

The impulse heavenwards from the earthbound first part of the poem continues through 'O clouds unfold' as the 'clouded hills' are left behind. The 'chariot of fire' can be interpreted as that of Elijah, the archetypal prophet, being taken to heaven in such a chariot. Blake wants his own chariot wherein he can play the prophet, not foretelling the future but mustering all his imaginative powers to show the truth. This will involve ceaseless 'mental fight' - remember the enslaving mills of the mind earlier. Again, 'the mind-fogged manacles' of the suffering people of London in the poem of that name, enslaved by the demands of commerce and the exploitation of its people, emphasise the centrality of imaginative freedom for Blake. The sword he will use for this fight might recall St. Paul's 'sword of the Spirit' (see Ephesians) and his use of military images to describe spiritual conflicts. Blake's imagery returns earthwards in the final line to suggest how his aspirations might be achieved. 'Jerusalem', in order to be built, needs firm foundations.

If the ideal city state, the utopian community described in visionary terms in the Book of Revelation, is to come into existence then Blake will need to be joined by many of like mind (note how 'I' has now become 'we') willing to cast off conventional attitudes and loyalties towards the way the social, political and religious order is arranged. Quite a challenge for those of us attending an international sporting event, a political rally, or indeed at our usual place in church on a Sunday morning.

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