

THE STORY OF "JERUSALEM"

Words by William Blake, 1757-1827.

Music by Sir Hubert Parry, 1848-1918.

The poem, Jerusalem, which, with its setting by Sir Hubert Parry, has been adopted by many Women's Institutes as their special song, is of such a mystic character as frequently to demand some sort of interpretation.

William Blake, painter, engraver and poet, was born in London in the reign of George II. His unusual imaginative powers found expression, not only in poetry, but in illustrations for many books, both in water colours and engraving.

The poem, Jerusalem, is taken from one of his "Prophetic Books" all of which are highly symbolical, and now very obscure.

The title, "Jerusalem," the dwelling place of Peace, embodies his vision of the ideal City of God, where Christ's law of Love prevails, and where men live in brotherhood with one another.

The first eight lines, which have been puzzling to many, refer to the widely accepted tradition that the living Christ actually visited England, in parts of Cornwall and Somerset. It is a historical fact that a trade in tin and lead existed in very early times between England and the country of the Phœnecians. There is a persistent tradition that Joseph of Arimathea was engaged in this trade; the idea occurs in a quaint song used by the tin miners. If, as many commentators have surmised, Joseph of Arimathea was related to the Mother of Our Lord, it is not unlikely that Christ, as a youth, may have accompanied him in some of his journeyings, during the period when the Gospels are silent as to his Life, between the ages of 12 and 30. The tradition survives in Cornwall, at Glastonbury in Somerset, and at Priddy on the Mendip Hills, where the trade in lead is known to have existed in the time of Christ.

It was to this story that William Blake referred, probably hearing it when on a visit to Priddy, a small village, lying in the very centre of the ancient lead and copper mining area. The entrances to the disused mines still shew, dark and terrible, against the green hillsides. Probably in Blake's time, gaunt machinery rose black against the sky line, causing his reference to "dark Satanic mills." Yet beyond them still rise the green hills of Somerset, peaceful and unsullied, and the beautiful belief of the country people is that these hills are always green because they were once trodden by holy feet. Possibly also Blake had in his mind the great increase of mechanical power all over England, and the cruel use of child labour in the mills.

This vision of England sanctified and claimed for Christ, by Christ himself, leads Blake on to the prayer and resolve of the second stanzas. He prays for the bow and arrow of burning enthusiasm, for the spear for closer battle, and above all, for the spiritual forces of heaven, the "Chariot of Fire," to carry him onwards, till his vision of peace shall find fulfilment in the fertile and smiling English land.

Sir Hubert Parry, for many years the President of the Royal College of Music, composed the music. The accompaniment is difficult, but it is possible to procure a simpler setting, and the marked increase of force and fervour in the two verses, though the air remains the same, should be clearly defined. "Jerusalem" formed part of the Jubilee celebrations in 1935, when it was included, by special command of King George V, in the programme of the great National Concert in the Albert Hall.

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