

JERUSALEM (*from 'Milton'*)

by: William Blake (1757-1827)

AND did those feet in ancient time
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 these 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.

Poem: 1804

Music: Sir Hubert Parry (10 March 1916 to boost morale as casualties grew in the First World War. The battle of the Somme began on 1 July)

Orchestration: Sir Edward Elgar (1922)

Role: national hymn preferred by many including George V to national anthem, now sung on the Last Night of the Proms.

Eric Liddell (16 January 1902 to 21 February 1945) in an internment camp:

Often in an evening I would see him bent over a chessboard or a model boat, or directing some sort of square dance – absorbed, weary and interested, pouring all of himself into this effort to capture the imagination of these penned-up youths. He was overflowing with good humour and love for life, and with enthusiasm and charm. It is rare indeed that a person has the good fortune to meet a saint, but he came as close to it as anyone I have ever known.

Seminar: 26 April 2012: European Culture Studies (EKS)

Building Jerusalem: Prophetic vision and materialism in modern Britain

The film *Chariots of Fire* (1981) coincided with, and perhaps helped to inspire, a new spirit of optimism in a Britain still depressed by post-war poverty and the decline of empire. Victory in the Falklands war the following year helped give Mrs Thatcher an iconic status as the 'Iron Lady' defeating dictators and trade union bullies (Arthur Scargill of the miners' union) alike. The following twenty-five years saw a marked rise in prosperity, which in 2007 appeared to be based on an illusion. Massive levels of national and personal debt had funded a consumer boom. Worse still was the realisation that the divisions between the poor and the wealthy had increased significantly. A recent inquiry into the riots of last year concluded that there was now an under-class of about 500,000 that felt completely outside society: most of the rioters, looters and arsonists had come from this group.

In retrospect, therefore, the optimism inspired by a facile reading of the film seems part of a passing phase. Yet, that is to miss the more profound message both of the film and of the prophetic poem that provided the title. William Blake was a visionary who lived through one of the most turbulent phases in English history: the French revolution threatened to spill over into England, and England found itself at war with France from 1793 to 1815, when Napoleon was finally defeated. Blake's poem drew on the legend that Jesus had walked on England's soil with his uncle Joseph of Arimathea: 'those feet in ancient time'. In the sixteenth century, Protestant reformers were keen on this legend, since it helped to build up a picture of Christianity coming to Britain before St Augustine brought it from Rome to England. Now, in twenty-first century Britain, men like Richard Dawkins are arguing that Britain is a wholly secular country, and that all traces of the Christian foundations should be removed. In the year when the Olympic Games come to London (the centre of wealth-creation) the role of sport is worth analysing.

Eric Liddell, one of the two heroes of the 1924 Olympics, went on to become a Christian missionary in China. During the Japanese invasion he refused advice to leave the country, staying to help his brother look after the poor. Along with thousands of others, he was interned in a prison camp, where he became an avuncular (uncle) figure, teaching religion and science, acting as an impartial referee in hockey games intended to boost morale and health. Finally, completely exhausted and on the edge of breakdown (and suffering from a brain tumour without knowing it) he was offered the chance to return to Britain as part of a prisoner exchange: he gave up his place to a pregnant woman and died shortly afterwards. This information was released by the Chinese government only in 2008, during the Beijing Olympics.

In that sense the film belongs to the oldest tradition in Anglo-Saxon poetry: the *ubi sunt?* theme: "Where are they?", the great sportsmen of old. Harold Abrams and Eric Liddell belong to a generation for whom sport was a hobby. They were *amateurs*, who came at the end of a hundred years when sport had been part of the revival of chivalric ideals. Early football players wore heraldic colours on their shirts, and were supposed to learn to lose generously, and be magnanimous in victory. Many ascribe the early enthusiasm for the First World War to the strength of these ideals of chivalry, which also inspired the scouting movement of Baden Powell. Now sport is a business, where Russian oligarchs and American millionaires buy English clubs, where footballers earn obscene salaries and become 'celebrities'. Where are they, the sportsmen of old?

The question is not so ridiculous. Another athlete who took part in the 1924 Olympics went on to become a leading member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Philip (later Lord) Noel-Baker was still speaking against nuclear weapons at the age of 94. Now leading sportsmen just buy Ferraris, while 500,000 people live on the margins of society. The prophetic verses that lie behind the title of the poem, 'Bring me my chariot of fire', are not meant to be part of a cheap patriotic hymn (however good the tune) but to inspire each person in the country to speak out against injustice, to work for a vision of a country where inequalities of wealth do not disgrace the national identity. Eric Liddell's missionary work (and his supreme sacrifice in giving up his life for another) challenge those of us who live surrounded by the materialist values of a consumer-based economy. As Pope John Paul II argued in 1989, the collapse of communism does not mean that capitalism is the answer. Capitalism unfettered by concepts of social justice is as brutal (in its economic consequences) to those marginalised, unemployed people as communism. In Spain, twenty per cent of the population, mostly young people, are unemployed.

The extracts from the film we will show on 26 April allow us to ask questions of modern Britain that are questions for all the countries in the European union:

What are we doing to fight against the 'dark Satanic mills' (the forces of mechanised, now computerised, capitalism that dwarf the human being)? What are we doing to fight for social and economic justice? In an internment camp Eric Liddell organised classes and games, instructed the young in the values and practice of fairness. What are we doing in our internment camp to help others, especially the young? Is sport now a force for good or have we allowed all the chivalric values that led the British to export football, cricket, tennis and rugby all round the world to decline into paying money for victory at all costs. The rise of cheating in sport is a worrying phenomenon. As Wittgenstein said, 'A game consists of the rules by which it is played'.

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