

Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

I wonder how many of you, without looking at your service sheet, could have said that those are the words that we hear immediately before the Hallelujah chorus? They are the culmination of a series of quotations from Psalm 2, which celebrates God's triumph over the 'kings of the earth' who seek to overthrow the Lord's Anointed, that is, in this interpretation, Jesus, the Messiah. We like to think of the Hallelujah chorus as a joyful response to the resurrection that brings this passion section of the *Messiah* to a close. But heard in sequence, it takes on a little of the swaggering, militaristic tone of the movements that come before: the Lord God omnipotent reigneth because he has dashed into pieces the nations that raged against him. A few years ago there was a little academic controversy over whether these movements were in fact anti-semitic; the debate made it as far as the *New York Times*. The consensus was that the verses are too general to be specifically anti-Jewish, but I think what really made music historians uncomfortable was the fact that they are *against* anybody at all. We don't like the idea of a triumphalist God, crushing his enemies, because human beings can do some pretty dreadful things when we think we have the might of an all-powerful God behind us. The smugly imperialistic *Rule Britannia* was composed just a year before the *Messiah*, and celebrated Britain's divinely ordained imperial power:

The nations not so blest as thee,  
Shall in their turns to tyrants fall;  
While thou shalt flourish great and free,  
The dread and envy of them all.

What do we do about this? If power is dangerous in human hands, how can we stand up for the Hallelujah chorus and celebrate an all-powerful God? In modern western Christianity the answer has often been to downplay this side of God, in favour of the despised and rejected Jesus of the beginning of today's section of the *Messiah*, the lamb of God who was wounded for our transgressions. And in responding to the *Messiah*, I could have done the same, ignoring the troublesome later movements, and focussing instead on the pathos of the Jesus of the beginning of part 2, who has born our griefs and carried our sorrows, or on the cleverly jolly chorus 'All we like sheep', which is one of the best depictions in art of how amazingly, compellingly fun it is to sin. I could have focussed, in other words, on the personal response these movements evoke, the amendment of life that is our calling in this season of Lent. Such a response to Jesus's sacrifice is both the beginning of faith and a stage in the journey to which I must continually return, reminding myself that however much I grow in faith, I remain a sinner

in need of Jesus's loving sacrifice. If you are finding that particularly difficult this Lent, my advice is to invite your family to visit. I've just had mine here, and I can tell you there is nothing like family for reminding you, over and over again, that you are a poor, miserable sinner.

Remembering that we are dust is an absolutely vital part of the Christian journey, especially in this season of Lent. But turning away from sin is much more than just resolving to address my individual foibles, to be more patient with my family. It is a dramatic opening of our eyes to the possibilities that God has to offer us, not only as individuals, but as a whole creation. What might happen if we did believe that God was all-powerful, that the Kingdom of this world could become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ? It is the poverty of our imagination that causes us to shy away from that image, to imagine that a God who reigned for ever and ever would be like the many human tyrants who have tried to do the same. But the point of these scripture passages, of the joyous hymn on which the Hallelujah chorus is based, is precisely that the reign of God is radically, transformatively different. God does not protect his own power for the sake of it, as even the best human leaders are tempted to do. God comes to feed his flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs in his arms. She comes to judge the poor with righteousness and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. God's power is for the powerless, God's wrath is for those who abuse their power, God's love is for all who seek God's face.

Living as if such a kingdom were possible is a profound act of faith, for anyone with eyes to see the injustices of our world. But we are called to even more: not only as if it were possible, but as if we are a part of making it happen, as if, in a sense, it has already happened to us and for us. We feed the hungry and clothe the naked because we have seen what the world can be in the reign of God, as well as the suffering of God's people in the here and now. If we live this way, in our lives and actions we draw in those who walk in darkness and long for this great light. Having seen the lamb who was wounded for our transgressions, we should cry out with joy that the Lord God omnipotent reigneth, not just for you and for me, but for the whole order of creation. Yea, Lord, let it be so.

In the name of God, who is creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. Amen.