

THE RYEDALE FESTIVAL SERVICE AT HOVINGHAM 2nd AUGUST 2015

There's an ancient Chinese fable about an elderly emperor and his barren wife. The Empress ached for a child and he longed for an heir.

One day they were visited by a Genie who offered them two wishes. The first was easy – a child. The second was more difficult. “We wish that our child should never feel any pain”. The Genie granted their first wish and immediately the Empress conceived. But he begged them to think again about their second wish. He would return after a month and grant their request. But the mind of the Emperor and the Empress was made up and when the Genie returned he was obliged to grant them their wish. The fable concludes that the aged couple were fortunate not to live to see their child grow up to become the greatest tyrant the world had ever seen.

The tyrant could feel no pain – neither his own nor the pain of anyone else. You see, the Genie had deprived him of his imagination.

For all the many virtues of the Authorised Version of the Bible its one blemish is that whenever it talks about the imagination it does so negatively.

As we heard from Genesis Chapter 6, “The imagination of their hearts was wholly evil continually.”

This pejorative use of the word ‘imagination’ is a pity because as the Chinese fable shows it is the imagination that is the key to a caring and compassionate world.

It is only when we have the faculty, the imagination to put ourselves in the shoes of someone else that we begin to care about them and for them. It is only when we can imagine what it is like to starve in a famine or to flee like a refugee or to die at the hands of a merciless fanatic that we begin to want to do something about it.

A world short on imagination becomes a cruel and compassion-less place.

That is why the Arts are so important in both education and festivals for it is through the Arts that the imagination is cultivated.

Of course, the Arts are good in themselves to be enjoyed and applauded for their own sake. Yet they benefit society because it is the stretching of the imagination through music, theatre, poetry and lectures that we strengthen the very faculty that makes society civilised.

When I was a curate I remember visiting a lady on her 100th Birthday. She'd had the telegram from the Queen. She told me about her Victorian childhood. How one day she'd come home from school with her report and handed it to her mother rather fearfully. On it the teacher had written "She's a dreamer!" Her mother read it thoughtfully and tossed the report aside saying "Then let her dream!"

That might not please every teacher but it's what a good education and the Arts should cultivate – the faculty and the imagination to dream.

It was Albert Einstein who wrote comparing knowledge and the imagination, "Imagination is more important" he insisted, "For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the world."

So, God bless the future of the Ryedale Festival that enlarges the imagination. Through the imagination we see the world both as it is and how it should be.

St Paul told us in that famous passage from 1 Corinthians that "we see through a glass darkly." Interestingly in the original Greek there is no mention of the word "darkly" at all. What he actually wrote was "now we see through a glass in enigmas". It is through imaginative stories, allegories, parables, pictures and poems that we explore and find the truth about the world.

And it is through such appeals to the imagination that the world is ultimately saved from the hands of tyrants.