Today I woke up to the strains of Yesterday in Parliament on the Radio. That’s not happened on a Sunday since 1982, the last time parliament sat on a Saturday. That was to go to war, in the Falkland Islands. Yesterday was to try and end the Brexit deadlock and pass the latest deal. In the end the vote wasn’t taken and the seemingly endless impasse goes on. I remember waking on 24 June 2016, the day after the Brexit referendum with an overwhelming sense of gloom. The country split down the middle, but now committed to a course of action that would be complicated, divisive, and costly in ways we could hardly imagine. Three and a half years on it has all been worse if anything than I could have imagined, with the country seemingly stuck in a lake of treacle from which it cannot escape.

If this is bad, imagine being God’s people in exile in Babylon. 70 years after the destruction of Jerusalem they are still there. 70 years after the siege, the famine, the terrible loss of life. 70 years after the long march through the wilderness to live as exiles in a faraway pagan city, where their God held no sway. Here they were, in Babylon. Lost, abandoned, hopeless.

Except they weren’t. They weren’t lost any more. They hadn’t been abandoned. They were no longer hopeless. After 70 long years they had found their God was real, even in a foreign land. After 70 long years they found their God had not rejected them, but rather God loved them with an everlasting love. After 70 long years of exile they were beginning to see a way forward. Certainly they had known despair. Now they felt the first stirrings of hope. Their God was real. Their God loved them. That was enough, here and now to give hope and confidence. Perhaps one day they might even return to their own Holy Land.

Today’s passage from Isaiah is from this time.

Verse 5: The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
the God of the whole earth he is called.

And most movingly in verse 10:

For the mountains may depart
      and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
      and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the LORD, whose heart goes out with love for you.

Our second reading today was from Luke’s gospel, written over five hundred years later than our first reading from Isaiah. The people of God are back in their own Holy Land of Israel. But they are no longer free. They live under Roman occupation, with the Herods as puppet rulers.

What comes out from today’s passage?

We see that Jesus had friends who were Pharisees. They often get a bad press in the gospel accounts. But here they are trying to save Jesus’ life, warning him to flee from Herod who wants to kill him. It reminds us that people are always people, and that one label does not fit all. Some Pharisees may have been harsh, self-righteous, even religious bigots, but some clearly were not. In times of division we label one another and write each other off as Remainers, Brexitters, whatever it is. But life is never that simple, thank God. Every person is an individual, everyone is free to step out of the box and to do what is right as these Pharisees did here as they sought to save Jesus’ life.

But Jesus is not about to flee. He speaks of his 3-day work: Today and tomorrow he will be casting out demons and performing cures, and on the 3rd Day he will finish. In Luke’s gospel we can look back to the 3 days he spent in the Temple as a child. His parents, Mary and Joseph, were frantic as they thought they had lost him in the throng of pilgrims. But he was doing his work, discussing and debating with religious leaders. And on the third day his parents found him. His work, for then was done. And of course Luke hopes is readers will look forward as well as back. Forward to Jesus’ death and resurrection. In his death and resurrection, Jesus will be doing his work, even while pinioned to the cross and unable to move. Casting out demons, this time by defeating evil itself by allowing it to do its absolute worst. Putting God’s Messiah to death. Jesus on the cross, performs works of healing to the very end, even from the cross, saying uniquely in this gospel ‘Father forgive them for they know not what they do’ about the very people who were putting him to torture and death; and ‘Today you will be with me in paradise’
to the penitent thief on the cross beside him. Casting out demons, defeating the devil himself, and curing souls to the very end. Then on the third day, today, Sunday, the Day of Resurrection, Jesus finishes his work, and a new life begins.

In today’s passage he laments over Jerusalem as we might want to lament over the UK today, and I do. But they had it much worse with despotic rulers, and punishments, slavery and public executions. In a beautiful image Jesus says that he longs to gather the people under his wings, as a Mother Hen gathers her brood of chicks under her feathers.

And finally he says, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’ Psalm 118 gives us the reference. It’s a psalm for a pilgrim procession, just as we had here yesterday for the St Frideswide pilgrimage as hundreds of pilgrims from around the diocese converged on this place. The psalm builds with shout after shout from the House of Israel, the House of Aaron, then from everyone. ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord’, as the festal offering is taken into the Temple, to be sacrificed for the forgiveness of sins. When he goes to complete his work Jesus knows that he himself will be that sacrifice. After that there will be no more need for any more animals to be sacrificed ever again. The covenant will be restored as we remember week by week at the Eucharist, the Holy Communion.

As we come eager and expectant to see and meet the Lord in the offering of bread and wine, as we raise the festal shout

‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the Highest!’