

April 17th

Memory verse

Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth:
and the heavens are the work of thy hands.
They shall perish,
but **thou shalt endure**:
yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment;
as a vesture shalt thou change them,
and they shall be changed.

Psalm 102:25-6

Younger children can learn the words in bold and understand that “thou” is God. More about this verse in the lesson for 19th April.

Something to think about



Sir Thomas More (1478 – 1535), author of *Utopia*, was imprisoned in the Tower of London on **17th April** 1534. He had disagreed with King Henry VIII over the issue of the king's divorce from Queen Catherine of Aragon “the king's great matter” and in the end he paid for his principles with his life. We learned about Henry and his divorce in the lesson for 27th February.¹ Sir Thomas had been Henry's Lord Chancellor and he had vigorously persecuted Christians who challenged Catholic teachings that were not in line with the Bible, sending many to be burnt at the stake. He also waged a campaign against the English New Testaments in Tyndale's translation that were making their way into England from the continent.

Sir Thomas invented the word *Utopia* which is still used to describe any theoretical or made-up social system designed to work perfectly and bring peace and happiness to its members. He made up the word as a kind of pun: it has a double meaning. *Utopia* is a combination of Greek words that mean “no” and “place,” but looks similar to a word meaning “good place.” Sir Thomas's “Good Place” is really “No Place.”

Sir Thomas sets his *Utopia* somewhere in the New World that was being discovered by the explorers of his day. Happiness is achieved in Utopia by having no private property. People are doled out what they request when they need anything. There are also no locks on the doors of the houses since these are not needed. There is no privacy in Utopia: everyone is kept in full view to make them behave well.

Everyone learns agriculture and also another essential trade such as weaving or building. Everyone wears the same simple styles of clothes. Everyone has to work. Gold is used for chains to fetter prisoners and other lowly uses deliberately so that people do not come to regard it highly. Jewellery is considered something only for children who discard it when they grow up.

There are free hospitals in Utopia but the state may end the life of someone at its discretion. Everyone has the same food which is served in communal dining halls. One can only travel about on the island if one has a passport giving permission. The law is simple and so there is no need for lawyers. Gambling, hunting, makeup and astrology are all discouraged in Utopia. Although Utopians dislike war they do sometimes find they have to engage in it.



¹ More about Henry VIII in the lesson for 28th June.

Even on paper, some aspects of Sir Thomas's Utopia make it sound a very *unpleasant* place to live. In fact we are not sure whether Sir Thomas himself was being serious or sarcastic. Certainly no one who likes to think for themselves would enjoy it and, of course, there is no way of knowing how Sir Thomas's system would work in terms of economics in “real life.”

Down through the ages people have longed for a Utopia. People see the inequalities and unfairnesses in their societies, and long to devise a system that will bring perfection. The problem, however, is sin. Human societies consist of fallen human beings. Even a society where everyone was a Christian would have strife and trouble because Christians are not exempt from having a sinful nature while they are on this earth!

A number of attempts *have* been made to establish a kind of Utopia in reality but once original sin is taken out of the planning there is a mismatch with reality that ends in disaster for any society. Communist systems such as that of Russia in the twentieth century, for instance, were founded on the Utopian idea that people would act unselfishly for the benefit of all. The results are always tyranny of the worst kind in the end. Later in today's lesson there is a section about Ivan Stepanovich Prokahnov. The cruel system under which Russia was ruled in Stalin's day was the result of a futile attempt to impose the Utopian communist ideas of Karl Marx in Russia.

Modern politicians continue to make the mistake of imagining that governments can provide a Utopia. The plans they make are often unworkable because of it. Here is an [up-to-date example](#) from the Welsh Government which you can watch. Keep the idea of “Utopia” in mind as you watch. Do you think whoever put together this video had “Utopian” ideas?

Here are some questions that might help you:

What do you think of the idea that a government can make a *law* about the well being of *future generations*?

Can the question “What does Megan need...?” really be answered solely, or even, mainly, by *government* and its provisions?

Is school the only way for Megan to receive an education?

Can the government really deal with “inequality of health between people?”

Can governments really control what language people speak? If they can should they?

Has *Megan* decided that what she needs is a “prosperous Wales, a resilient Wales, a healthier Wales, a more equal Wales, cohesive communities, vibrant Welsh culture and language and a globally responsible Wales?” If not who has decided for her?

If you could set the seven goals for your own country what would they be? Which of your goals could be provided by government directly? Which could be encouraged by government indirectly?

Which could not be influenced by government at all?²

Do you think the plans for Wales outlined in the video take account of the sinfulness of human nature?

Something to look at and something to make

It is 1635 and the Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand, the new Governor of the Spanish Netherlands, is preparing to make a triumphal entry into Antwerp after his victory at the Battle of Nördlingen in the previous year. The artist Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1650)³ has been commissioned to work on the decorations for the event and he has designed wooden arches and special stages to be erected in the city for the grand procession. But now Rubens is ill with gout. **April 17th**, the date of the triumph, is approaching: who can work on Ruben's sketches and produce decorations?

² I thought of: a democratic Wales, a free Wales, a just Wales, a peaceful Wales, a less wasteful Wales, a well-defended Wales and a godly Wales.

³ More about Rubens in the lesson for 29th June.

The artist chosen for this important job was Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678). He was commissioned to use Rubens' sketches and complete the work. His painted decorations are now lost so I have chosen another of his paintings for today's lesson and we will have to imagine that it was one of the decorations used at that triumph – which it might have been!

The painting is called *Kent V Selven* meaning: “Know Thyself” which is possibly one of the Dutch poet Jacob Cat's “Emblems”⁴ and the subtitle is “Youth Between Vice And Virtue.”



The picture shows a richly dressed young girl combing her hair. Two figures accompany her – perhaps representing her thoughts. Both are old men. One, in a bright particoloured hood like a fool or jester, is holding up a mirror. He is Vice. His mirror shows what she looks like – now. In the foreground is another more sombre figure. Can you see what he is holding? This is Virtue and he is holding an hourglass. He is reminding the girl that time is passing. One day there will come a day of reckoning. Study the girl's eyes. Is she looking at the mirror or the hourglass? I don't know if it my imagination but I think she has one eye on each!

“Know thyself” is an aphorism or saying that goes all the way back to ancient Greece. It is one of three riddling maxims written in the court of the oracle at Delphi which was consulted by the pagan Greeks for advice.⁵ Like much of the advice of the oracle, the aphorism is difficult to understand and impossible to put into practice. Jeremiah 17:9 explains why: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: **who can know it?**” The Psalmist understood that he could not “know himself” and wisely cried out to God, “Search me, **O God**, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts....”

⁴ See the lesson for 10th November.

⁵ The others were: “nothing to excess” and “certainty brings insanity”.

“Youth between Vice and Virtue” was a subject other painters had treated, although usually with a young man as the subject rather than a young woman. These painting emphasise the idea of choosing the correct path in life; the path of virtue. Here again the Bible tells us that human beings can never choose rightly – if they choose unaided. The account of Joshua and the children of Israel related in Joshua 24 bears this out. The children of Israel, even when they said they would resolve to choose to serve the Lord were unable to keep their resolution.

How can the young lady in the picture – or any one of us – make the right choice then? The answer is to put our trust in the One who can choose for us. Augustine of Hippo⁶ was aware that he could not know himself or make a right choice for himself. He prayed:

Lord Jesus, let me know myself and know thee and desire nothing save only thee. ... Let me fear for myself... and let me be among those who are chosen by thee. Let me distrust myself and put my trust in thee. Let me be willing to obey for the sake of thee. Let me cling to nothing save only to thee... Look upon me, that I may love thee. Call me that I may see thee and for ever enjoy thee. Amen.

The hourglass with its warning of the final day of reckoning is more important than the mirror which only tells of the present. One day God will call us all to give an account of our time. This is a lesson which we should all take to heart. Today's optional resources files include instructions for how to make your own hourglass.⁷

Something to read from history⁸

April 17th marks the birth of “The Martin Luther of modern Russia”, Ivan Stephanovich Prokahnov (1869-1935). Can you find **Vladikavkaz** in your atlas? It is in the **Caucasus**, a range of mountains between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. It is here that Ivan was born. His family was a Christian one, and Christians were persecuted in Russia at the time by the Russian Orthodox Church. In this wild and mountainous region Ivan's family had found a refuge. His was an unusual start in life. At ten days old everyone thought he had died. His poor parents had him put in a little open coffin and the funeral began. To everyone's joy, however, baby Ivan opened his eyes and began crying. He was not dead! God had spared him and He had a great work for him to do.

Before he became a Christian himself, Ivan went through some hard times. Reading such authors as the Russian Fyodor Dostoevski, and the Germans Arthur Schopenhauer (the “Philosopher of Pessimism”) and Eduard von Hartmann as well as seeing the misery he saw around him drove him to contemplate suicide as a young man. His father, sensing something was wrong, had removed the gun with which Ivan had planned to kill himself, putting a note in its place which read “Do you love Jesus Christ?” this incident prompted the great change in Ivan's life. From then on he did indeed “love Jesus Christ.”

Ivan was baptised in the **Terek River** and began to train as a mechanical engineer, hoping that this would be a way of meeting many working people whom he could tell of the love of Jesus. He began to preach. He started a little magazine, *Beseda* which means conversation. The idea was to help scattered Christians and those in exile to whom the magazine could be secretly passed on from hand to hand. He signed his articles in the magazine “Zacchaeus” – which was a personal joke since he

⁶ See the lesson for 28th August (yet to come.)

⁷ By kind permission of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers by email 15/08/22.

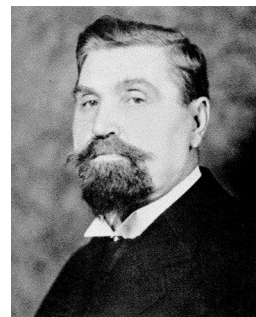
⁸ Information from I.S. Prokahnoff, *In the Cauldron of Russia 1869-1933*. (New York, 1933), Victor Knowles, “Ivan S. Prokhanov”, *Christian Standard*, (23/11/2013) and other sources.

was a big, tall man! He qualified as an engineer and began work. Every evening he either preached or worked on the magazine. Ivan wrote hymns in Russian, too, some of which are still sung today. It was he who translated from Swedish into Russian the hymn which in English is known as “How Great Thou Art”.⁹

Ivan recognised the emptiness of worldly philosophy. Perhaps it was the memory of the pessimistic philosophers he had read as a young man that led him to subtitle his autobiography: “The Life of an Optimist in a Land of Pessimism.”

Ivan's gospel work was not welcome to the Russian authorities. His very life was in danger but God provided a way of escape. Ivan was an engineer and through the offices of an American working for the Westinghouse Air Brake Company he was able to go to **Finland**. He travelled to **Sweden**, **Germany**, **France**, and London.

Away from the difficulties of life in Russia, Ivan made a careful study of God's Word. He realised fully that the New Testament provides the complete pattern for the church. He began to raise money to help persecuted Christians in Russia. When he returned to his homeland he was at once placed under house arrest. But he did not lose his vision of missionary endeavour in Russia. He was allowed to return to **St Petersburg** in 1901 and he began working for Westinghouse there. In the evenings he went to secret meetings of believers. He preached and also wrote letters explaining the need for religious toleration, edited more “underground” i.e. illegal magazines, wrote more hymns and produced leaflets, booklets and publications for young people. Keen for all Christians to be in fellowship with one another he founded the All-Russian Evangelical Christian Union in St. Petersburg in 1909. This organisation held congresses and even sent out missionaries. The first missionary went to **Siberia**.



God blessed his endeavours and there was a revival. Thousands of churches began all over Russia. Ivan Prokhanov recognized that each church should be independent and hold to the New Testament as its only guide of faith and spiritual life. A Bible college was started in St Petersburg and Ivan never stopped working. Sometimes he was at his desk night and day.

Then came the Russian Revolution of 1917. Ivan called it “an appalling reign of terror.” Millions died of starvation or were executed. Ivan lost his wife and was separated from his sons while he remained in St. Petersburg ministering to believers in starvation conditions. He was arrested more than once and put in prison but in 1923 he was released and went in 1925 to America on a visit to raise funds for Russian Christians. This was followed by the rule of Stalin, about which we will read more in the lesson for 17th December. By now there were many Christians in Russia – perhaps as many as 4 million. In 1928 Prokhanov was away raising funds for Russian Christians in Canada. While he was out of the country Stalin's regime declared him “a conspirator in counter-revolution.” Now he could never go back to his beloved Russia.

Below is an extract from Ivan's autobiography which describes an experience in **Tver** Hard Labour Camp in 1921. He later wrote about this experience in a hymn which you will find at the end of the extract.

...on the second day the chief of the Cheka [KGB secret police] came to our cell. He was a short fellow, somewhat lame, and of a stubby, rather uncouth appearance. He said:

“We have had all kinds of prisoners here, but we have never had such noisy fellows as you are! You sing all the time. You disturb us in our work. The people gather in the streets around the building. We cannot allow you to continue this noise any longer!” We argued with him, saying: “If we are

⁹ See the lesson for 25th July.

deprived of the possibility of singing at liberty we must have the right to sing in prison where there is no liberty.” But he would not listen to us. Finally, after some negotiations, a compromise was reached. We were allowed to have our meetings for prayer and singing twice a day, two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening. Possibly it was a provision of the Lord for our welfare, for in our enthusiasm and joy we were likely to burn ourselves out in praise at high pressure.

We now had our meetings in the court yard, and we availed ourselves of this opportunity to its utmost capacity. We sang, read the Word of God, and prayed. The red soldiers, militiamen and even the officials of the Cheka who were in this institution came and listened to us. We even saw some of them, red soldiers at that and supposed to be atheists, trying to learn the hymns of praise to God and making an effort to sing with us. It only illustrates how our Evangelical hymns have been taken up even by non-Christians, who thus aided in proclaiming the Gospel over Russia.

We saw men and women on the roofs of adjacent houses, where they had climbed to see who were daring to sing in the presence of the terrible Cheka. Many people gathered in the street outside to listen to our singing. Was there ever such a testimony! It was so unusual, it was wonderful! Who could ever forget it! We used to come out of our basement cells into the court yard in rows of two in a solemn procession, like the processional of a large choir in the cathedral, and two by two we marched back again to our cells, singing as we came and went.

The Prison

1. *Outside the prison chamber
The guard walks slowly by.
A song of glad thanksgiving
Is loudly sung on high.*

2. *The people passing swiftly
Can hear its clarion call;
They marvel: why this gladness
Inside a prison wall?*

3. *Who sings, within, such praises?
They wonder, as they stare;
But, “Brethren of the Gospel,”
That is the name they bear.*

4. *Says one who pauses, showing
That his face, too, is bright:
“These are their songs of rapture
To Christ, Who is their Light.*

5. *“They sing in fullest measures
When heavy falls the rod;
No prison bars or shackles
Restrain the truth of God.”*

6. *In vain the guard is waiting;
This song will never cease
Till God's own will and pleasure
Shall be fulfilled in peace.*

7. *The distant plains of Russia
Shall now receive the Word;
Her forests and her mountains
The joyful sound have heard.*

8. *Through all the lands and nations
God's Word shall conqueror be,
And bring souls out of prison
To rapturous life and free.*

9. *See where, beside the prison,
Men stand to hear the song;
And many, taking Jesus,
Forsake their life of wrong.*

10. *The guard, most deeply stirred now,
Has laid his musket by;
He listens — grasps the meaning —
His doubts all fade and die.*

11. *His eyes grow clearer, brighter.
He gazes up the street,
While his soft humming echoes
The prisoners' music sweet.*

12. *More fully now he gathers
The meaning of the song;
For he has found his freedom
From sin, and shame, and wrong.*