

## Remembrance Sunday Sermon

Have you ever thought about the coincidences that make you you? All those random connections of people meeting across the centuries that have culminated in you being you and me me. For example, if my father had not been a prisoner of war for four years I would never have existed and you would have a different rector standing in this pulpit. Why? Because when he came back from the war he found his wife with another man, leading to their divorce and his eventually meeting and marrying my mother.

I was born nearly twelve years after the end of the Second World War, but it was still very much the backdrop to my childhood, and there was constant reference to the war and the disruption and dislocation it had brought to our family. Moreover, there were still many people alive who could well recall the First War, including my own grandfather, who served in Egypt and received the DCM. And my mother worked for a time at The Star and Garter Home for disabled ex-servicemen and I remember as a boy going up there with her and meeting many of the men with no arms or legs, or neither. It's now being turned into luxury flats.

We live in a very different era. There are fewer and fewer people alive today who even remember the second war.

Yet still we come. And in recent years the power of the poppy has gained fresh potency. In this centenary year there has been a host of special books, radio and television programmes and films to commemorate the ending of WW1. And I've been very moved this week to go into our village schools and to witness not only the care and thought that has gone into the commemoration, but also the interest it has aroused in the children.

Two things were central to those involved in the First World War. The first was a bitter awareness of the gulf between what was said at home and what was experienced in the trenches. Those returning from the trenches found themselves almost incapable of talking about what they had witnessed, partly because the language used by politicians and the press, from the comparative comfort of London, the language of chivalry and knightly deeds, bore so little resemblance to what was actually happening. The language that was so often used presupposed that glory in war was a wonderful, straightforward, righteous affair. The reality was unspeakably grim. The glory, if indeed there was any, was a lot more prosaic.

The second thing was that the nature of war had changed. Not only was it the first war fought with modern technology. It was also a war whose effects reached into almost every household in the land. And it was these two realisations which perhaps led at least some leaders in the Second WW to speak more soberly. Archbishop William Temple, for example, said "We recognise that this is all to do with the sin in which we're all implicated, so that the *best* thing we can do is still a *bad* thing." "War itself," he said, "never produces a positive good, though it can restrain worse evils." <sup>1</sup>

I suspect that if we were to take a poll in church today we would find, as in the population at large, divergent views, sincerely held, on matters of war and peace and defence. There is, for example, a very honourable tradition of Quakerism and pacifism within the Christian community. Equally there

are very deeply committed Christians in the armed forces, like General, now Lord, Dannatt. The issues, like most issues that affect us as a society, are deeply complex.

The rise of fundamentalism and populism that we are witnessing should be a warning to us all. Throughout history wars have been caused very largely by the megalomaniac tendencies of demagogic rulers, from Nebuchadnezzar and Herod in the Bible through to the dictators of the twentieth century, Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and, although perhaps not in the same league, Kim Jung Un, Putin, (Trump?) - leaders with a nationalistic agenda, often with territorial ambitions, often scapegoating minorities; vain men with over-sized egos, inflicting their narcissistic personality disorders on an often supine populace.

In OT times the people of Israel were ruled over for a period by judges. It wasn't exactly egalitarian or what we would call democratic, but it was closer to democracy than an absolutist monarchical regime. But the people became restless and cried out, as they so often do when times are tough, for a strong leader. They instituted the monarchy, with mixed results.

The world today is hugely more complex than it was then, but just as susceptible to the attractiveness of simplistic solutions. After both the world wars there was a longing for peace and a recognition that something needed to be done to try to prevent war on that scale from happening again. After the First War the League of Nations was set up. But its effectiveness was limited by the fact that the US never officially joined, the USSR only belatedly, and Spain, Italy, Germany all withdrew in the 1930s. Its successor, the UN, set up after the Second WW, is still with us, mercifully. It has its flaws, but like the EU and other similar organisations, the flaws are only partly institutional. They exist also because of the reluctance of member states thoroughly to commit philosophically, existentially and financially.

If this place is to have any real significance, if Christian faith (or indeed any faith) is in any sense real to us, we can never glibly endorse the status quo nor the maxims and values of contemporary society, nor the inevitability of conflict. People of faith are those who ask difficult questions, of themselves and others. They are those who seek to bring the gospel values of integrity, justice, peace-mongering, fair-dealing into all the corners of their lives. They are those who stand up against racism, sexism, and jingoism. They are those who challenge our institutions and our systems whenever they seem to collude with oppression and corruption.

Each year we come to a service like this and pray for and pledge ourselves to work for peace. But unless we act on those pledges they remain ineffectual platitudes. I find that I cannot be a Christian with any real integrity unless I do something, however small, to build a juster, fairer, more equal world. It might mean joining a political party, it might mean signing a petition, it might mean supporting a charity. But doing nothing in the face of the world's pain cannot be an option.

To me the world feels as if it's going the wrong way. The grossly indecent accumulation of wealth by the few has got to be ethically wrong and will lead inevitably to increasing tension in society and potentially to war. The proliferation of arms, the degradation of the environment, the displacement of peoples – none of these has any coherence with the gospel message. We need to invest far more fully, individually and collectively, in bodies that are dedicated to the reduction of tensions and the fostering of interdependence between nations and communities.

It is not the Church's task to tell people how to vote, or even what to think or do. It is the Church's task to provide a place, a context, in which we work out for ourselves our own response to the invitation of Jesus to be peacemakers in whatever situation we find ourselves.

I spoke at the beginning about the disparity between how the first war was marketed at home and how it was experienced in the trenches. The prophet Micah also noticed a disparity between what was proclaimed and what was practised and he challenged the people of Israel with these words:

*All the peoples walk each in the name of its god,  
but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God.<sup>2</sup>*

Throughout history the people have been tempted to follow false gods. Throughout history the prophets have sought to draw them back. God grant us the wisdom to listen to the prophets of our own day, the prophets of peace, the prophets of reconciliation, and lead us away from the prophets of narcissism, of hedonism and all the others isms that have wrought such havoc in our world.

In the second lesson, Paul wrote to the Colossians about the graces that are needed for right living. He finishes: *And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.<sup>3</sup>*

God grant us the grace to listen to that word, and, as we listen, to hear.

1 Letter to a friend, November 1939.

2 Micah 4.5

3 Colossians 3.14