

Remembrance Sunday 2016

The Bible is not shy of considering the affairs of nations and the ways of God. Those who exercise authority and command great forces are subject to laser sharp scrutiny. How they act, who they trust, the alliances they make, the enemies they create, the manner in which they fight, how they react in victory or defeat: all are considered, evaluated, judged. What might seem like a logical political decision to make an alliance with a friendly nation, for example, looks very different when held up to the light of God, just as history teaches us uncomfortable lessons even centuries after the events themselves

We live in turbulent times on the world stage. What will the histories in a century's time say about 2016 and the recent upheavals of our democratic process? What does the conduct of our campaigns and their aftermath look like in the light of God, under the judgment of the Almighty? Perhaps we can take comfort that, at least for the Referendum and the US election the processes of democracy were ones for which our nations fought in the Great Wars remembered today, but that does not excuse some of the inhumanity shown around them. And if we widen our gaze just a little, people are dying every day and not too far away in conflicts in which we play a part. The Bible is not shy of considering this.

And the Bible is not shy of entering into the depths of the individual experience of conflict, especially its effect and its aftermath. Take the searing cry of the commander of the armies of Israel at the death of the commander of his enemies in a bloody civil war. Why a searing cry, not a shout of triumph? Because the King is David and the enemy commander is his son, Absalom. "Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom." Some war memorials have combatants from both sides on them: some enemies have previously been friends; some fighters are blood relatives. Few who have been there glory at the time in victory. Death transcends war, and grief is common to us all. The searing cry of pain is at the heart of God.

The matters we consider today are both on the great stage of world events and in the profound experience of the individual. It is one hundred years since the Battle of the Somme, and some of its thousands of dead are memorialised on the cenotaph here where wreaths have been laid this morning. It was war on an industrial scale. Its commanders presided over great armies. And it contained lots of people like you and me, very young, very frightened, very determined, very ordinary. Take this extract from the Diary of Private Walter Hutchinson, a stretcher bearer, from the earliest days of the battle. He survived, and died in Cleethorpes in the 1980s.

On July 4th Tuesday we ... made some tea and had something to eat for the first time since Saturday morning. It rained all day but we had to make the best of it. We got wet through and at night we went on a working party and was up to the waist in water. ...

Just after dinner Fritz started shelling us again ... I was talking to these three men some 10 yards away and a shell dropped and killed all the three of them. It was an awful sight. ... We ... got the poor fellows buried which was a very difficult task for shells was dropping all round us.

He is as pleased with his tea as he is frightened by the carnage around him. War is dreadfully mundane and devastatingly extreme. We enter it at our peril.

The Bible's scrutiny of humanity is unceasing. Some will take decisions whose repercussions shatter nations. We have to pray for those who could press a button and bring down Armageddon. That's a Bible word. Megiddo was a battleground, a contested piece of land in Israel where trade routes crossed. You fought over it very hard, and it became the symbol of the cataclysmic conflict to end everything. Those who can rain down Armageddon now need our trust, and our scrutiny, and need to consider their actions in the light of history and the light of God.

Those who fought, whom we remember today, did so for great world reasons: because of justice and righteousness and freedom. And they did so for domestic and intimate and human reasons: because they had to, because of duty, because they had friends and you did things together. Look at the displays in the South Transept - the Pals who went from the same street because that's what you did. Friendship, honour, a sense of right, a cry for justice and fairness. Worth fighting for now.

They fought for peace, and we should do so too. That means we should hold our leaders, our nations, ourselves, up to such scrutiny that we exhaust every avenue before armed conflict is the only option. That's what peace makers do.

The light of history teaches us that. And the light of God requires us to do that.

May the fallen rest in peace. And may the living honour such sacrifice with lives worthy of their very best, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.