

Swords into ploughshares

The sermon given by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, at the Remembrance Service on 11 November 2018 (the 100th Anniversary of the signing of the Armistice), in Beverley Minster.

Isaiah 2:2-4

Just before the outbreak of the First World War, my Great Uncle Harry was a young farmer in Herefordshire and when he joined up, he joined the cavalry and he took his horse with him, just like the boy in the film *War Horse*. Four years later he came back from France, but the horse didn't. And as a child I remember being shown his brass spurs: a reminder of a way of fighting that seemed unimaginably distant.

One of the most recent war memorials is one that I find is also one of the most poignant, perhaps because of that family connection. It's the animals in War Memorial in Park Lane in London, which was opened in 2004. It consists of a curved wall about eight feet high with a gap in the middle. The surface of the wall is covered in relief sculptures showing all the different ways in which animals were used, perhaps particularly in the First World War. There are horses and mules, elephants and camels, dogs and pigeons and they're shown in various states of labour and suffering. And walking towards the gap in the wall are two life-sized bronze statues of artillery mules, weighed down with ammunition boxes and gun wheels: they look exhausted and afraid; their heads bowed and tails down and ears back and their limbs straining. And if that's all this memorial was, it would be another reminder of the suffering caused by war and of how it extends beyond the suffering inflicted by human beings on each other.

But there's more to it than that, because on the other side of the gap in the wall there are two more bronze sculptures of a horse and a dog. But these animals are different, because they've been set free. They're no longer weighed down with packs and saddles and baggage and they're no longer in danger. Instead they've been released to run and be themselves, to lift their heads and feel the joy of life. It's a picture of transformation from fear and cruelty, to freedom and peace. And it's a picture that resonates with that of the Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah from whom we've just had a reading. In that reading Isaiah looks forward to a world

transformed, a world still recognizably our own, but one in which all nations will walk in the ways of God and as a result will see the instruments of war transformed into instruments of peace...

"They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war anymore"

... and so human creativity in devising weapons of war will be overtaken by God's purpose to renew the earth and make it fruitful and at peace with itself.

So we have these two visions of the same reality, in the animals in War Memorial and in the prophecy of Isaiah, two different but comparable visions of the transformation of war into peace. And I think these two visions are particularly appropriate for today: because today is the one hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of peace; it is the anniversary of the moment when the carnage stopped and the slaughter was finally over. And for the men on the Western Front who had thought that death was inevitable, a new future came into view: a future of peace and of new possibilities; a transformed future almost unimaginable before the armistice had been signed.

And so for us today, our remembering has this extra dimension. Yes, we are looking back and remembering the endurance and the sacrifice of those who gave their lives, not only in the Great War, but in every conflict since. But we are also giving thanks for the peace, for the fact that although wars are still breaking out, in the end, peace always comes. And this Remembrance Sunday is a good moment to ask ourselves, "What sort of world should follow when war ends and peace breaks out? What sort of transformation would be needed in order to make a truly lasting peace?"

Christians are used to remembering in order to find transformation and peace: we do it every time we celebrate Holy Communion. In that act of worship we take bread and wine in order to remember Jesus's suffering and death and subsequent resurrection, which we believe have given us life and peace. And we remember, not in order to feel guilty that he went through something so that we don't have to, we remember in order to find forgiveness and reconciliation, to be set free from our past so that we can be at peace with God and ourselves. Out of that sense of inner peace of having been made one with ourselves and the world, Christians find hope and inspiration to

work for reconciliation with others: the remembering points us towards the future not the past.

Now you may or may not find that Christian vision compelling: it may seem too strange or unfamiliar, but the question still remains, "What sort of transformation would be needed in order to make a truly lasting peace?"

Those whom we remember and honour today are now, we trust, at rest and have found their peace. But wouldn't it be wonderful if we could find peace in our own lives today on this side of the grave?

If we dare to hope for the transformation of war into peace in our world, let it begin here and now; let it begin with the transformation of our own hearts; let it begin with you and with me.