

Say it with Flowers ...

... Offer Ourselves in Love

A reflection for Remembrance Sunday, 14th November 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Isaiah 2:2-6; John 15:12-17

"Say it with flowers."

I don't know if you remember the old advertising slogan, and the popularity of flower stalls on our markets and florist shops all over, show that we do indeed need to say it with flowers. We can say all kinds of different things: A bunch of flowers can say thank you; it can say I'm sorry, please forgive me; it can say I love you; Flowers can say Congratulations; they're a wonderful way of celebrating something, whether it's a wedding or an offering brought by guests for supper.

Flowers can Mark out an occasion as being special. And in Victorian times there was a whole language where different flowers were supposed to express different moods and emotions: a red carnation expressed pride and admiration; but a yellow carnation was supposed to express rejection or disappointment. So there are all sorts of different things we can say when we say it with flowers. And the thing about the language of flowers is that they go beyond words. Flowers express what words often cannot and often do it more beautifully. Flowers can have different layers of meaning. They can express love, celebration, and thanks all at once. And what makes the offering of flowers particularly powerful is that when you give flowers, you are giving a little piece of yourself. We're saying something more than words. We're offering ourselves. A gift of flowers represents the giver. So when you give flowers to say sorry, it's a real gesture of reconciliation, of wanting to put things right and admitting yourself to be in the wrong. And it's somehow more powerful than just saying I'm sorry.

[Jonathan holds up a wreath of poppies]

So what are we saying when we offer these flowers? What does a wreath of poppies say?

The poppy famously flourished on the battlefields of France and Flanders in the First World War - the churned-up ground provided an especially good environment for

them. And the paradox of such a beautiful flower springing up in the midst of death and devastation is especially powerful. The poppy speaks of beauty. It also speaks of war, of death and of bloodshed. The poppy speaks of sacrifice, of duty, of a debt owed by others. The poppy speaks of remembrance, of a desire not to forget those who may have died in some cases, many, many years ago. When we lay a wreath of poppies at a war Memorial, there are many meanings, many ways of reading it, which is perhaps what makes it so powerful.

And my question for us on this Remembrance Sunday is about this gesture of giving flowers. If it is normally the case that when we give flowers, we are trying to offer something of ourselves, what are we offering when we lay a wreath of poppies?

Gratitude perhaps, for the sacrifice of others; respect and admiration for those who laid down their lives; love for those who perhaps were family members or close comrades. All of these can be true and are part of what we are doing here today. And maybe part of the message in these flowers is the desire to say, sorry: we're sorry we asked you to lay down your life for us; we're sorry we made that demand as a nation; that we made you offer that sacrifice; we're sorry we put you through such terrible suffering, and we don't want to ask anyone ever to do that again.

In the reading, Jesus says that *"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."* It's a text inscribed on war memorials up and down the land. But Jesus isn't saying it as a general rule to justify the sacrifices made in war. He's telling his disciples that he's laying down his life for them because they are his friends, and he's laying down his life for them so that they don't have to do it for themselves. They don't have to die. The proper response to Jesus laying down his life for his friends is that his friends should then love each other, *"I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."*

The death of Jesus on the cross was meant to be the sacrifice that didn't need to be repeated. So as we wear our poppies today, and as we lay this wreath and others, we do so with enormous gratitude for those who served. We do so to honour their memory. We do so with great sadness and love for those who haven't come home. And we do so in a spirit of repentance that we have failed to let Jesus's sacrifice be the last of its kind.

So let us lay down these poppies with a stronger resolve to love one another; to seek the ways of peace and reconciliation; and to live as citizens of the kingdom that is not ultimately of this world and which doesn't need to be defended by force of arms.

Let's say it with flowers. Let's offer ourselves in love.

Reading Texts

Isaiah 2:2-4

² In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³ Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. ⁴ He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

John 15:12-17

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.