

Made in the image of God ...

... to know the Peace of God

A sermon given on Remembrance Sunday, 12th November 2023 by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Isaiah 2:2-4; John 15:12-17

Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday are supposed to be occasions that bring the country together in a great show of unity. So it's a matter of great sadness that this seems no longer to be the case, and that this year the build up to the demonstrations in London yesterday has shown how some people on both ends of the political spectrum have seen this weekend as an opportunity to sow division. So this is perhaps a good moment to remind ourselves why we keep this Sunday as a special day of remembrance.

Now, I want to suggest that this is first of all a pastoral occasion when we show our support for those who have suffered in time of war. When Armistice Day first began after the First World War, its central purpose was to remember the fallen. It was a kind of national bereavement service; a moment of quiet reflection to remember those who didn't come home; a moment to remember and pray for those whose lives had been traumatised by war; and to acknowledge the scars that they bore, sometimes physical wounds and disabilities, but also the less obvious mental scars which afflict so many veterans and which never fully heal. So it's right that at the heart of this remembrance Sunday, we should see the armed services, the Royal British Legion and other veterans organisations, and show our pastoral support for them, because theirs are the communities that are most afflicted in times of war, and theirs are the lives which are changed forever when their country requires them to take up arms. So I suggest we are here first of all to remember and to support those whose memories are particularly painful.

But since those early days, the purpose of Remembrance Sunday has perhaps broadened out. Nowadays, we not only remember, but we also give thanks. And people may give thanks for a variety of things: for our way of life; for our various freedoms; for the preservation of democracy. But I want to suggest that more than anything else, the thing we should be giving thanks for today is the gift of peace. Who would have thought that after 75 years of peace on mainland Europe, there could be a major war in Ukraine involving hundreds of thousands of troops and millions of people displaced? - we've got used to peace in Europe and we're in danger of taking it for granted. Or who would have thought just a month ago, that the Middle East would now be in its biggest conflagration for 70 years? Wherever we look around the world today we see

wars: in Afghanistan; in Sudan; Somalia; Ethiopia; drug wars in Mexico; wars in Yemen; as well as in Gaza and Ukraine. And what that tells me is that in many parts of the world, war is normal - peaceful places like the United Kingdom are the exception. So we should never take our peace for granted.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus tells his followers to love each other. And at first sight, that commandment might seem so obvious as to be banal. But when you look around the world today and see just how much violence there is, not just the violence of armed warfare but the violence of gang warfare, of domestic abuse, and the violence of some of the rhetoric used by political leaders around the world - we then start to see just how radical Jesus' teaching is. There is in fact nothing obvious about telling people to love each other, because many people find it easier to hate and to despise than to love. So we should vigorously oppose those voices that sow division and which seek to exclude the 'other', because it's when different groups try to silence and exclude each other that the seeds of violence are sown. So despite all our problems, we give thanks to God today for peace in our land over so many years.

And finally, I want to suggest that we are here not just to remember and not just to give thanks for peace, but also to look forward. Did you notice how our first reading was not a memory of past wars, but was a prophecy of future peace? *"In the days to come",* said the Prophet Isaiah, *"God shall judge between the nations and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares. And nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."* There is something greater than the love of country, and that is the love of God. And it is when we discover the love of God that we discover the rivalries of nation and class and tribe and race can be overcome, as we find unity in the fact that we are all made in the image of God and we are all his children.

In my first parish, I got to know a veteran of the Second Battle of Tobruk, fought in 1942. He was a lovely Christian man who had seen fierce fighting when two of his friends were killed on either side of him before he himself was taken prisoner. And he was left with the question, 'Why me?' But not, 'Why should I have to go through the horrors of war and captivity?' but rather, 'Why should I have survived when my friends didn't?' It seemed so unfair to him. But years later, it was while reflecting on that question 'why me?' that led him to a faith in the God of peace, as he looked for a positive purpose in his life. And he found that purpose not chiefly in his identity as an Englishman or as a Yorkshireman, or even as a Scarboroughian, where we were at that time - but by discovering that he was a child of God, bearing the image of God, and made to know the Peace of God.

So today we remember those who have suffered and died in time of war, and we honour their memory. Today we give thanks for the gift of peace, and we resolve not to take it for granted. And today we hear afresh the promise of peace extended to all who bear the image of God, who discover themselves to be accepted and loved as children of God, and who seek in this troubled world to live as citizens of that kingdom of peace, into which Jesus himself summons us.

Reading Texts

Isaiah 2:2-5

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.*