

Sermon for Remembrance Sunday 2014

Introduction: Today we intentionally remember all those who have died in the service of this nation through the last hundred years and especially those who lost their lives in the First World War. And if you have seen the poppies at the Tower of London, each one representing a person serving this country who died in the Great War, you'll have an appreciation of the scale of loss. A sea of red in the Tower moat, some appearing as a waterfall evoking lives poured out – of those serving the British Empire, more than 900,000 died and 2,000,000 wounded. About 5% of the UK population were killed in the conflict.

But, of course, it's not just *our* war dead that we should consider. We're not the only ones left mal-affected by that war: Russia – 1.7 million dead, France – 1.35 million, Italy – 650,000 and so on; plus, of course, those allied with Germany, who lost more than any nation – just under 1.8 million (twice as many as the UK). Overall there were more than 22 million allied casualties and 37.5 million enemy casualties. What awful loss and terrible world-wide grief!

So, why do we deliberately remember such sad facts each year and particularly today?

There are three questions I want to briefly address as a way into the 'why we remember':

1. **Why do we remember WWI 'the War to end all wars'?** Each year, on this Sunday, we always remember, of course, in order to honour all those who paid the ultimate price in the fight to preserve justice in the world, whenever that has been the purpose of allied involvement. As one of the prophets, Micah, said 'Let *justice* flow like rivers and righteousness – right-living – like an ever flowing stream'. So we remember in order to consider the price that is paid in terms of human suffering and death in maintaining justice in our world and should ask ourselves why is it necessary? But justice alone, brought about without mercy easily becomes barbaric, as we have recently seen in our international news stories. The prophet Hosea said, 'What does the Lord require of you but to act *justly*, and love *mercy* and walk humbly with your God'. Loss on such a huge scale as in WWI does not seem to have had much of an element of mercy in it. But, 'Why *wasn't* WWI 'the 'War to end all wars'?' What went wrong and continues to go wrong? We 'remember' today in order to consider just what makes for peace and what makes it so elusive? This brings me to my second focus:

2. **How can peace be achieved?** It seems hopeless – war does not end war. As we reflect over recent years on all the international war and peace-keeping efforts in the Middle-East and elsewhere, we may well ask ourselves 'where is that peace for which we've worked so hard on so many fronts?'

Yet the prophet Micah speaks of a day when, '...nations shall beat their swords into ploughshares...; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.' But how can that be achieved?

History tells us that even the best international efforts at peace-making and peace-keeping fail to bring lasting peace. Although we should recognise that they can be very effective in restraining evil, such as in WWII when the evil of Nazism and the injustice of the arrogant imposition of a super, Arian, race was resisted and overcome.

Despite our forces having a role in restraining evil through peace-making and peace-keeping operations, we must acknowledge that this does not lead to an end to wars.

From today's reading, we hear of a time when the Lord God will rule the world from His 'city of peace' (the literal meaning of the word Jerusalem). This hope for world peace has its root in the

God bringing in His Kingdom and rule of peace. And in Jewish, Christian and Muslim belief, this is brought into effect by the future coming of the Messiah or, in Greek, the Christ.

Jesus claimed to be that one – the promised Messiah and said, 'There will be wars and rumours of wars *until* I come *again*, in my power and glory.' Jews, Christians and Muslims all look forward to the coming of the Messiah. In this hope we are united. In the Christian Faith we are taught by Jesus to pray for it's coming in the words 'Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

So do we simply have to wait for Jesus to return for the coming of God's kingdom on earth, or do we have a part to play before that day? I believe the answer is an emphatic 'YES'. But what can we do?

3. **What is peace and what makes for it?** What can we all do to contribute, whether we are in the forces or not? We tend to think of peace as an 'absence of war', that there will be world peace when all wars cease. But isn't peace something much deeper, something which happens in you and me – something which is peaceable and is recognised in harmonious relationships? Would all relationships be harmonious if there were no wars? I doubt it somehow, as conflict seems to be in our very nature – the way we are as human beings.

The core problem, I believe, is that we're hard-wired for self-preservation. The old days of Empires were about making sure member nations were secure in having enough food and resources – usually at the expense of other nations who *also* wanted that security.

The root cause, then, is fear rather than faith. Fear that one's security is at risk. If only all people could trust God for their provision and security instead of being fearful. Local boundary disputes are evidence of this – if you have ever seen the programme 'Neighbours from hell' you'll know what I mean!

Consider how you feel when someone is rude to you or hurts you. What do you want to do? Hurt them back – that's vengeance; alternatively, we may want to do something to make ourselves feel safer.

In understanding how we get into conflicts, one can see how nations get into conflicts. When we feel under threat our hard-wiring can cause us to demonise the perceived threat and to rally our energy and forces to make us feel safe. It's what goes on in our emotional life which seems to call the shots.

The real battle for peace, then, is an *internal one*. If only we could all so manage our emotions or channel the negative aspects into constructive rather than destructive action, (*'Do good to those who hurt you!'*) peace could be attained. For this we need God's Spirit in our hearts, not just His external just rule. This internal battle is the primary struggle that we, as human beings, have to fight if we are to know peace. In mainstream Islam as well as in many other Faiths this is the good fight that we have to engage in; this is, I'm told, true Jihad. It's the battle to love the other even when we experience them as our enemy. It's the struggle to be merciful and forgiving when all our emotions are shouting for revenge and conflict. It's the fight to trust God rather than to give in to fear. It is the way of Christ that all Christians are called to practice. As Jesus put it, 'Blessed are the peacemakers for *they* shall be called children of God.'

It's something all of us here can do with God's help – it's within our grasp, if only we have the will to fight this good fight. Will you join me at working at it? If so, then peace will increase in our midst and we will be truly blessed.

In Conclusion: Wars cannot bring lasting peace. But God can and ultimately will. And for this we pray, 'Thy Kingdom come O God, Thy rule on earth begin.' But it begins with you and me.

I end with a quote by the current Dalai Lama:

""Peace starts within each one of us. When we have inner peace, we can be at peace with those around us. When our community is in a state of peace, it can share peace with neighbouring communities, and so on.""