

Remembrance Sunday – 10 November 2024

Message – The challenge of War

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, comfort and challenge us and help us to reflect your love. **Amen.**

As Christians there is an underlying tension as we come to Remembrance Day. War is contrary to the way of Christ but so too is allowing the enslavement of others.

Wars, past and present, often presents us with morally wicked problems requiring moral compromise. Though we may struggle to recognise it, there can be validity to the arguments of both sides. In the absence of diplomatic engagement both sides may feel justified in declaring war.

In the cases of both the war in Ukraine and Israel's war against Hamas both sides believe they are in the right. The history behind many conflicts is too complicated for any simple solution not to create some kind of injustice.

There is another tension in Remembrance and ANZAC Day. We remember those who have served. Yet, in most wars, at least as many civilians as combatants die. This is not the new phenomenon, it has persisted through history though technology can make it far worse, in some wars.

Many civilians have in no sense willingly giving their lives but others have chosen to use their skills to play their part in other ways. Medics, seafarers, researchers, miners, farmers, reporters, numerous professions all support any nation's struggles. And some people will have paid the ultimate price for choosing to use their skills in this way.

Some who have served their country in such ways feel a sense of disgrace at not having served in the military, despite their necessary service of a different kind.

Even when a war ends, for the families of those who have died and many of those who have been involved in the war continue to pay the price. Both physical and mental suffering may be a part of the rest of people's lives and some of that may pass to future generations.

There is a deep need to remember, reflect, lament, and give thanks, acknowledging the great cost, if we are not to find ourselves too easily drawn into conflict again.

How should we as a worshipping community mark the lives of those who have given so much for our freedom. In English churches there is Remembrance Sunday as well as Remembrance Day so the remembrance is built into the liturgical life of the church.

Here, it is not built into our liturgy and each church has to choose how and when we will remember. I have chosen readings today appropriate to remembrance but I know that other churches will be using the readings set for this Sunday. One priest in our archdeaconry is including an act of remembrance in today's service for the first time in their congregation's living memory. Perhaps you have views on this, I would love to hear them.

When we read the Hebrew Scriptures, it is easy to think that God is quite keen on war. God's involvement in the conflicts in which Israel is involved is seen as pervasive. And, when they are taken in to exile it is seen as still being at the hand of God and God working through the Babylonians.

At times it feels hard to believe that the same God is being described in the Hebrew and Christian scripture. One theologian has suggested that God was learning to be God and suggested a change not in who God is or the qualities of God but in the God's dealings with humanity.

God is larger than that but I wonder if humanity has been learning to hear God and so our perceptions of God have changed. We can read the bible as the account of a part of humanity's deepening relationship with the Almighty Creator. In the Hebrew Scriptures there are competing voices that see God quite differently, particularly on the issue of justice. God is just, that is not in question, but how that justice is seen in the lives of individuals is debated.

Even in the New Testament, we can see the thinking of the early church developing and evolving as they embrace new situations and contexts, most fundamentally, how are non-Jews to be included and to what extent do all Christians have to follow the Jewish laws.

We too must continue this work of considering our context and allowing our thought to develop and evolve. The need for this did not stop with the death of the last of the apostles. We are all, as the English ordinal puts it, called to express the gospel afresh to each new generation.

We must reflect on what it means to be citizens of a democracy, the worst form of government, except for all the others and also a part of a global community of nations. These contexts are continually changing and very different from the context into which the Anglican church was born.

We also have to be radical, in the sense of going back to

our roots. If we are followers of the way of the Nazarene, what does that mean today. Though the question is overused, asking, what would Jesus do is fundamentally what we are about. As the body of Christ, we are Christ in the world today. As remarkable, compassionate, and challenging as Christ was so we should be today.

So, in the context of Remembrance, how are we compassionate? We start with a compassionate theology. There are parts of the Bible that understood in an unnuanced way appear entirely exclusive and anyone who dies without declaring their faith in Christ perishes.

Such absolute theology does not account for God's love, justice, or mercy, though there are some torturous arguments that try to claim that these qualities of God are preserved. You will guess that I, along with most of the people I have cared for, find such claims unconvincing.

Christ is clear, *no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13)* Those who have willingly given up their lives, have shown the deepest possible love to others, that invincible and unending goodwill towards others that comes from God. While I am not entirely sure what justice looks like, I am sure that the God who judges what is in our heart will not condemn those who have made such a sacrifice. Exactly how they are justified, well that is God's problem not mine.

Following the way of Christ is not just about what we believe. In fact, Jesus makes it clear that words are not enough, that our actions proclaim what we believe. All those who have sacrificed life or health or wellbeing for the

love of others are walking in the way of truth and life. The way of Christ is perhaps only exclusive in the sense that Christ is the perfect example of life in all its fullness. Anyone who lives out that example is found in Christ.

We are able to offer compassion, as Christ offered compassion. And how should we challenge as Christ was challenging to those whom he met?

Christ's challenge is always appropriate to the individual or group. Often the challenge was a personal one. Christ spends a lot of time gently challenging the thinking of the apostles. But Christ also challenges many others to transform parts of their lives. We must be careful if we do this. We cannot judge others, we do not know all their circumstances, but we should challenge those who are failing to love others or even harming them.

This does not stop with those around us. Christ regularly challenged the religious leaders, wherever they were creating injustice, placing burdens on others without reason.

As people fortunate enough to live in a democracy and to be part of a synodically governed church, we should be providing such challenge wherever we see injustice. We cannot do it all but, as a community, we can do more than we think, supporting and encouraging one another.

Almighty God, we pray for peace on earth.

We commend to your care those who have died from war, and all who yet struggle for health and peace.

May the memories of sacrifice strengthen our resolve to do justice, to strive for peace and to walk humbly with you, our God. Amen.