

Sunday 12th November 2023 – Remembrance Sunday. Rev Alison Bruton

Readings: Micah 4: 1-5; John 15: 9-17

The prospect of delivering the sermon on Remembrance Sunday can bring with it various thoughts and often a number of anxieties. One is that it is likely that the congregation will hold diverse and contradictory views on war. There might be those who expect affirmation of the importance of standing up to evil in the world, while there might be others, who have a very different perspective and who find Remembrance Sunday very difficult, particularly if they come from a pacifist standpoint.

As a child I was brought up to respect the annual opportunity to remember those who lost their lives in conflict as well as to think of their loved ones whose lives had been so irreparably damaged. My father was in the Royal Navy and served in the Far East during the Second World War. He didn't tell me a great deal about his experience of being a Chief Petty Officer working mainly on damage control; but the one thing I do recall is that he mentioned where his bunk was...right next to the magazine which is where all of the missiles and explosives were stored. Thankfully, he survived the conflict and I'm here today.

One person I always do remember at this time of year is one of my dad's closest friends, Percy Salisbury, who went down on HMS Repulse when she was sunk in December 1941. My dad is no longer here to remember Percy and so each year I do so. I think it can be really helpful when thinking about the impact of conflict if you are able to personalise it in some way so that you can appreciate more fully not only why we remember but, perhaps more importantly, why we should be actively seeking peace.

I have never experienced outright war, but as a child I was aware of living under the threat of possible conflict, be it the Cold War that lasted until the late Eighties, or the climate of terrorism, whether in Northern Ireland or, more recently, the various incidents which have taken place in this country. I was in London on 7th July 2005, attending a conference and, but for a sudden and unusual change of plan, would have been on one of the underground trains that was bombed. That experience certainly brought home to me the personal impact that conflict can have.

So, as we turn to our bible passages today, what are we to make of them in the context of our Remembrance service? In verses 3 and 4 in Micah chapter 4 we see that it is God who weighs up the disputes between nations, only he has the power to establish peace and justice between them; and when this happens weapons of war will be transformed into instruments that help produce food as they will no longer be needed for their original purpose. This picture seems very far from our experience today, doesn't it? But whether we take the view that Micah was speaking prophetically about a coming historic period in the fortunes of Israel, or whether he was speaking apocalyptically about the time after Jesus has come again to the earth, we all have our part to play in praying for and working for peace in the world right now, however challenging and impossible that may seem.

Turning now to our Gospel passage which forms part of what is known as the farewell discourse of Jesus in the Upper Room. It is obvious to see Jesus' compassion for his disciples and he takes this opportunity to both reassure them and to give them an insight into what is going to take place.

What does it mean for Jesus?

Perhaps the most significant verse in relation to today is verse 13: 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' There is no doubt in my mind that when Jesus said this, he was referring to his own forthcoming death on the Cross. This is where he will go. It will not be a tragic accident. It will not simply be the forces of history. It will not be against Jesus' will, he says that he will lay down his life. It is deliberate and purposeful. It is his intention. It is not that he will risk his life and perhaps he will die; Jesus will consciously lay down his life in love.

The death of Christ, then, is the supreme example in history of someone laying down their life for others out of love. And it is a sacrificial death to which we all need to respond. This is the great death to win the war on evil. Christ absorbs and conquers evil, not by violence and bombs, but by submitting to its worst and coming out victorious.

What does it mean for the disciples?

Having looked at what our Gospel passage meant for Jesus, let's now take a look at the implications for his disciples. In verse 14 we see that Jesus refers to his disciples as his friends; what does it mean to be a friend of Jesus? Are we to be good buddies? Doesn't that cause us problems given that Jesus is divine, and we are human? I would like to suggest three things that being a friend of Jesus means for us today:

- We are chosen, as we see in verse 16: 'You did not choose me but I chose you'. But why are we chosen? Certainly not so we can take on a sense of elitism, but rather to be fruitful for God's kingdom (here we are again looking at our fruitfulness, this seems to be a recurring theme). But when it gets tough, that knowledge of being chosen by Jesus can help to see us through.
- We know what is going on. As we have seen, the final discourse gave Jesus the opportunity to explain to his disciples what was to happen, not that they fully grasped it perhaps. Similarly, we can see the bigger picture through what we read in the Bible, about the cross, the empty tomb and the coming of the Holy Spirit. We are not in the dark.
- We are commanded to love as he has loved. This might seem strange as we've come to regard love as something spontaneous which comes from within. John uses the word 'commandment' more to indicate the pattern by which Jesus lives and which he is passing on to his disciples. Verse 9 gives us a notion of the sequence within which our love for each other sits 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.'

Conclusion

No-one has greater love than Jesus who willingly died for the sins of the world. Our response is to receive the forgiveness he offers through it and be transformed into those who also will live risky, sacrificial and fruitful lives for the sake of his kingdom. What love can be greater than this?