

Reflection for Remembrance Sunday, 14 November 2021 Simeon Mitchell

Readings: Micah 4:1-4, Matthew 5:43-48

103 years ago this week, the guns finally fell silent and what had become known as the Great War, the war to end all wars, came to an end. Of course, it was not the war to end all wars. But today, two or three or four generations on, we still take time to remember.

What we choose to remember today will be different for each of us:

- Some will be remembering loved ones lost in one of the world wars
- Some may be recalling their own experiences of war
- Others' thoughts will be caught up with more recent events – with family members involved in the conflicts in Afghanistan or Iraq or elsewhere, or memories of one of the many terrorist atrocities of recent years
- Many will bring a sense of thankfulness for those who gave and give their lives to stand up against tyranny and oppression
- Some may feel uncomfortable with the way in which Remembrance can too easily turn from an honouring of sacrificial service into a nationalistic glorification of military endeavour – seeming to forget that pledge of 'never again'.

The word remember is literally made up of two parts: re- and member. In one sense it is therefore the opposite of dis-member. So remembering is becoming part of something again, being put back together, being brought into wholeness. It's especially important when something has been destroyed or damaged or lost.

As we bring our different perspectives on this Remembrance Sunday, we should therefore also re-member –

...to offer thanksgiving and prayer

...to recall that we are under the care of a God of boundless love, who looks out for the lost, and promises, as we heard in Micah, a world healed from conflict

...and to reflect on Jesus's challenging message that if we are to make this world a reality, if we really are to re-member and restore wholeness to all our relationships, it will involve doing some hard things. Loving our enemies. Praying for those who hate and persecute us.

This is not a popular or easy message – certainly not in times of war. Even now, as we think about those who blow up our troops, or commit terrorist outrages, or open fire indiscriminately on innocent concert-goers or worshippers – we might wonder about our capacity to enact Jesus's words.

As we try and do so, I invite you to remember two further things today. One is about other people, and the second is about us.

The first thing to remember is that everyone – absolutely everyone – is a child of God. Friend and foe alike. As Jesus puts it in the Gospel, God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." Because one of the most terrifying things about war and conflict is how it brutalises and dehumanises. It makes us forget our common humanity.

Sir Antony Beevor's book *Berlin* documents the horrifying events of the last weeks of the Second World War. On the Eastern front, a feature of this stage of the war was the appalling propaganda used by the Russians against the Germans and the Germans against the Russians. Beevor comments:

One of the most unintentionally revealing remarks was made by... the [Russian] General Maslov. He described German children crying as they searched desperately for their parents in a blazing town. 'What was surprising,' wrote Maslov, 'was that they were crying in exactly the way that our children cry.'

Soviet revenge propaganda had convinced its citizens that all Germans were ravaging beasts – not ordinary people.

Such attitudes are common in times of war. And the accounts which have surfaced in recent years of the ritual humiliation and torture of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay remind us that the dehumanisation of the enemy is not confined to other times and other peoples.

On a different level to this, but also disturbing, is the depiction of some of our European neighbours in the British media, especially around and following the Brexit referendum, and rises in hate crime, which cannot be unrelated. Or the uninformed, undifferentiated accounts of Islam in much of the Western media, or of the Jews and Israel in much Arabic media. Caricatures are disturbing because it can be a very small step from parody and ignorance to persecution.

Reflecting on the brutality and inhumanity of Auschwitz, the monk Thomas Merton wrote that in order for something like the Holocaust to happen, “It is enough to affirm one basic principle: anyone belonging to class x or nation y or race z is to be regarded as subhuman and worthless, and consequently has no right to exist. All the rest will follow without difficulty.”

Merton goes on: “As long as this principle is easily available, as long as it is taken for granted, as long as it can be spread out on the front pages at a moment’s notice and accepted by all, we have no need of monsters: ordinary policemen and good citizens will take care of everything.”

Remembrance should therefore not be about remembering our differences and reviving long-ago enmities, but remembering what we have in common with people everywhere. Leave the judgement and the reckoning to God. Simply love your enemies. For God does.

The second thing I invite you to remember today is that we can all be peacemakers. Mahatma Gandhi said, “Peace is not something that you wish for. It is something that you make, something that you do, something that you are, something that you give away.”

You might not feel that there is much you can do to influence those global forces which stir division and ignite war in our world, or the political and military leaders who make these life-or-death judgements. There are precious few who can moderate the bellicose rhetoric of a Vladimir Putin or a Kim Jong Un, though we could be encouraging our government to stop allowing the selling of arms to regimes like Saudi Arabia, and to sign up to the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

But the call to be peace-makers and love our enemies applies just as much in our relationships and our communities as it does in the machinations of international diplomacy. We have been reminded in recent years by movements such as ‘Me Too’ and ‘Black Lives Matter’ that how we use our power in our relationships with others is a vital question where we all need to take responsibility for our actions and attitudes. Are we conscious of our privileges? Are we being peace-makers in our dealings with our families, our friends, our neighbours? Are we reaching out to those we find difficult, and praying for them as Jesus suggests?

For peace is not only a matter of avoiding conflict. True peace is also about justice and inclusion, and so requires engagement. Did you notice that towards the end of the passage from Micah, after the bit about people not learning war any more, there is this evocative pastoral vision of people sitting under their own vines and their own fig trees in peace. They are not only freed from the old battles, they have the resources to determine their own futures. They have received a just settlement.

The biggest reason that the Great War wasn’t the war to end all wars was that the conditions of the peace treaty were so punitive towards Germany that resentments festered, creating an environment in which fascism could breed. One reason why the conflict in Holy Land has been so long-running and bitter is that Palestinians do not feel they have had a just settlement or been treated fairly with regard to the occupied territories. Riots and outbursts of violence in our society are mercifully rare, but when

they have occurred, they have often been the result of a sense of injustice combined with an experience of marginalisation.

Being peace-makers means ensuring that people feel they have a place in society, that they are listened to and have an opportunity to thrive. We can all play a role in this.

I want to end with a story which brings to life that wonderful vision from Micah and that point that we can all be peacemakers. It concerns a man called Senhor Sousa Manuel Goao, who was born near Maputo in Mozambique in Southern Africa. As a young man, during Mozambique's civil war in the 1980s, he was forced into an anti-government rebel troop unit.

When a cease-fire was finally agreed in 1992, United Nations troops were meant to disarm both sides. They collected some weapons but most remained hidden – including some held by Sr Goao. It meant that although the civil war had ended, Mozambique could still be a violent and dangerous society.

But a decade later Sr Goao handed over 5 guns - four AK47s and an automatic rifle - to an organisation called the Christian Council of Mozambique – or CCM – which was being supported by Christian Aid. And in return he received a sewing machine, which he used to start his own tailoring business.

CCM was a small organization, working with a couple of old trucks that kept breaking down, but over a period of several years it collected and destroyed more than 100,000 guns, grenades and rocket launchers in this way. Those who give up their weapons were given tools – ploughs, bicycles and sewing machines. In a land where many struggle to make enough money to eat, a simple plough can be the difference between life and death. The Mozambique government supports the operation. It knows former rebels would not hand in weapons to the authorities for fear they would be prosecuted.

The weapons were cut up in CCM's compound in Maputo and the pieces were handed over to a group of Mozambican artists, who turned them into sculptures. They even made chairs and coffee tables out of cut-up Kalashnikovs.



The local Bishop, Dinis Sengulane, said at the time, “It is a practical solution based on the Bible. I say to people that sleeping with a gun in your bedroom is like sleeping with a snake - one day it will turn round and bite you. We tell people we are not disarming you. We are transforming your guns into ploughshares, so you can cultivate your land and get your daily bread. We are transforming them into sewing machines so you can make clothes. The idea is to transform the instruments of death and destruction into instruments of peace and of production and cooperation with others.”

Every generation can turn swords into ploughshares. Of course you may not have a stock of AK47s under your bed – indeed I hope you don't.

But today, as we reflect this Remembrance Sunday, let us also remember that everyone is a child of God, and that like Sr Goao, we can all do our bit of peacemaking.