

Remembrance Sunday 2020

James 3:14-18 & Matthew 5:1-12

Earlier this year, if you can cast your mind back to the pre-summer months, our nation marked the 75th anniversary of VE Day - the day in 1945 when after six years of war, victory for Britain and its allies was finally won in Europe. The long years of war finally gave way to peace. The anniversary should have been marked on May 8th with National celebrations, but of course, due to the Coronavirus, celebrations had to scaled back to celebrations at home instead. And poignantly, just a month after the 75th anniversary, Dame Vera Lynn, the Forces sweetheart famous for her war time songs, died at the age of 103.

So, today, in our Remembrance Service, we particularly remember all those who gave and lost their lives in the Second World War. But we remember too the sacrifices of so many, many fallen soldiers and civilians in the First World War and other more recent conflicts. We honour those who have served to defend our democratic freedoms and way of life, the service and sacrifice of the Armed Forces Community from Britain and the Commonwealth.

In our church, today, there are poppies in all sorts of forms - painted on pebbles, sewn on quilts, arranged in flower displays. The poppy, in the words of the Royal British Legion, is a symbol of remembrance and hope for a peaceful future.

Today, as we remember the huge sacrifices made by men and women for the sake of our nation's freedom and peace, surely one of the greatest ways that we can honour them is to do all that we can to strive for a peaceful future.

The scriptures that we just listened to, the Beatitudes in Matthew's gospel, and the teaching of James, are deeply concerned with the behaviour of those who would follow Christ, including being people of peace.

James 3:17-18 says,

“ The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

Who doesn't want love and desire peace? (Most if not all people, I would say).

It's easy to desire peace. It's more challenging to be a peace-keeper, to help keep the peace. But Jesus and James aren't thinking about liking or even keeping the peace. They're concerned with something much more pro-active - they're looking for peace-makers.

James goes on to say, "Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness."

And in Matthew 5:9 - Jesus tells us,

"Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

What is peace? Dictionary definitions of peace describe it as "freedom from disturbance"; tranquillity; a state or period in which there is no war or a war has ended.

But surely, peace is much more than an absence of conflict. Peace is an environment in which everyone can flourish, thrive and grow.

This quality of peace doesn't just happen. It is something that has to be worked for in our relationships with one another, in our neighbourhoods and communities, in our world.

The bible commentator, Alec Motyer, says, "In a world characterised by conflict and rivalry, a keeper of peace is rare, a peace-maker still rarer."

Why should we, in particular, be peace-makers?

Because God himself is the supreme peace-maker. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and we are the recipients of his peace-making.

Colossians 1:19-20:

"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

For Jesus, nothing less than shedding his blood on the cross, was what he needed to do to bring peace in our relationship with God. If we have received such peace and reconciliation through Jesus, then how can we *not* respond by also being peace-makers, people who sow peace in our relationships and groups and communities?

Indeed, the bible calls us to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18):

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation”.

In his letter, James was writing to the church, to Christians who were clearly not living in peace with one another. He speaks of how envy and selfish ambition lead to disorder and every evil practice. Envy of what others have, self-centred ambition and lust for more, for power, for me to be at the centre, lead to fights and quarrels:

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.”

In James 3, being a peace-maker sits within a description of attitudes, choices and behaviours that are the complete opposite:

James 3:17-18

¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”

All these attitudes that James talks about - being pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere, are meaningless on their own. They only have meaning within our relationships with other people. How can you be considerate unless you are being considerate to someone else? How can you be impartial unless there is someone or some group of people who you could show favouritism to instead?

Peace-making is first and foremost rooted in our attitudes and our behaviour in relation to others. And being a peace-maker requires work, action, and will, at times, involve sacrifice and pain on our part.

Today, as we think about being peace-makers, what does it mean for you and me in our relationships with others? Are there relationships in which you need to making peace in? Which are the relationships in which you need to be sowing harmony? Are there groups of people who you may not know personally, but who you are aware that you might have a tendency to be suspicious of or envious towards or prejudiced against? You’re aware, perhaps that there are seeds in your heart with the potential to grow into behaviour and actions that are the opposite of peace-making. Are there ways in which you might be a peace-maker in the local community or perhaps more

widely even than that? All our individual acts of peace-making together can make significant ripples in our families, our friendship circles, our streets and neighbourhoods.

Most people will never find themselves in positions in which they can influence, directly, world peace. But if we play our own small part and work towards peace in our relationships and communities, then together we can bring greater peace in the places and communities we live in. We can be peace-makers where ever we are, and God can take the seeds we sow and use them in ways we might never imagine.

So, today, on this Remembrance Sunday, we remember and honour those who have made the ultimate sacrifice to defend our freedom and peace. As we remember and honour them, I encourage us all to be those who work for a peaceful future, to live our lives in a way that sows and makes peace.

Amen.