

Remembrance Day and Third Sunday before Advent - Wisdom 6.12-12 Matthew 25.1-13

Every year we gather together around Armistice day to remember the hundreds of thousands in the armed forces that died in the first and second world wars, and in other wars. We give thanks for their great sacrifice and every year we commit ourselves to working for peace, and we pray for an end to all wars.

For most of these years as we have been praying for peace, there has been war waged somewhere in the world, often in a place far enough away that we have failed to relate realistically and meaningfully to the devastation war leaves in its wake. The closest we have come to experiencing or hearing of the ravages of war in recent times has been the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leaving many fleeing for their lives and some of whom came seeking refuge in our homes and households.

This year however feels different. The war in the Holy Lands, more than a month in, has been quite literally shocking. Perhaps it is because of the widespread graphic pictures of the devastation, the suffering, the loss of Civilian lives, many of them innocent children and babies or those that are sick in hospital. Perhaps it is because it is in the Holy Lands, where we would instinctively expect to see peace. Somehow this war feels closer to home, and maybe there is a sense that as Christians we are more personally affected. We find ourselves tempted to take sides, to justify war. But war comes at a cost. Always.

On a couple of occasions in the last six years, I made a pilgrimage to Flanders. I remember gingerly walking the Salient, conscious that buried underfoot could be some unknown soldier whose body is yet to be found, a life brutally cut short. A roll call of soldiers that died, and a wander around the extensive cemeteries dotted about in Flanders with column upon column of names etched into the walls of memorials in Passchendale, to pick just one, and row upon row of gravestones, write for the Allies and black for the Germans, reveals that many who died were just teenagers. The scale of the great losses alone, not too mention the families left bereaved, had such a profound impact on me that I had this stole made to remind me of the dreadful ravages of war. War is soul-destroying. There are no winners. In the book of Lamentations 3.17, the prophet Jeremiah writes about the pain, suffering and destruction of Jerusalem in the wake of the Babylonian invasion around 586BC. 'My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is.' To be bereft of peace is to be constantly in a state of anxiety, of fear.

When we hear the phrase of the Kohima Epitaph¹,

¹ (The Kohima Epitaph is the epitaph engraved on the Memorial of the 2nd British Division in the cemetery of Kohima (North-East India) in 1944 during World War 1, not used if there are any Burma Star Veterans).

*When you go home, tell them of us and say,
For your tomorrow, we gave our today.*

we are being given the blueprint and the starter for ten for a peaceful future, all we need is wisdom, a wisdom that we are told is easily discerned by those who love her, a wisdom to be able to see the folly of war and aggression and to pursue all that makes for peace. Jesus models the way of peace – he remains silent in the face of accusation, pities those who provoke him and forgives those who condemn him to death, the shameful death of a common criminal. Consider what would be the outcome if Jesus was the rebel leader that some of his followers wanted him to be, so they could be free of Roman rule?

Jesus calls us to be peacemakers, when he says ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.’ (Matthew 5.9). It is not enough that we are simply peacekeepers. Wisdom seeks out the peacemakers. Peacemaking is about helping to reconcile people to each other, and also to God. It is about looking beyond ourselves, to the needs of others, to the needs of the world, to the needs of the peoples of the world. It is about living in harmony and about the raising up of all peoples, no matter their ethnicity, Israelite or Palestinian, no matter their religion – Jew, Muslim or Christian. It is about calling out injustices, and sometimes these actions will cost us dearly. Wisdom is not about taking the easy option. It is about doing the right thing it is about storing up treasures for heaven, so that when judgement day arrives and Christ returns, we are not found wanting like the foolish bridesmaids in our gospel reading. Now is the time to act.

Let us then today honour the sacrifices of our war dead, striving for a true justice and peace that brings about equity and love for all of God’s children, through a generous sharing of the lands, resources and grace that God has freely given us. Let us heed the wisdom of Paul in Corinthians 13.11 and put away the childish squabbles over possessions and power that escalate into war. Let us also find our voices to pray and advocate for peace, justice and compassion. Let us lament the loss of happiness in the absence of peace and ‘wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord’ for ‘vengeance is mine, I will repay’ says the Lord. (Romans 12.19) It is not up to us to play at being God.

Let us pray

Most gracious God and Father, in whose will is our peace, Turn our hearts and the hearts of all to yourself, that by the power of your Spirit the peace which is founded on righteousness may be established throughout the whole world; through Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace and Lord of us all. Amen.

Archbishop Hosam of Jerusalem asks us to pray for peace in the Holy Lands:-

O God of all justice and peace,
we cry out to you in the midst of the pain and trauma of violence and fear which
prevails in the Holy Land.

Be with those who need you in these days of suffering; we pray for people of all
faiths – Jews, Muslims and Christians and for all people of the land.

While we pray to you, O Lord, for an end to violence and the establishment of
peace, we also call for you to bring justice and equity to the peoples. Guide us into
your kingdom where all people are treated with dignity and honour as your children
– for to all of us you are our Heavenly Father.

In Jesus' name we pray, **Amen**