

# Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost, 9 November 2014

---

*Revd Claire Nye Hunter, Cathedral of St Michael and St George, Grahamstown*

**Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25** Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

**Psalm 78: 1-7**

**1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18** We do not grieve as those who have no hope...

**Matthew 5: 1-12** Beatitudes

*Text: Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.*

## Introduction to Remembrance Day

November is a season of remembering. Last Sunday, we celebrated 'All Saints Day' in the morning, 'All Souls-commemoration of the faithful departed' in the evening; and today is Remembrance Day (also known as Armistice Day or Poppy Day).

Remembrance Sunday day is not specifically a religious festival but a secular day. It was established in 1919 in UK as a day of remembrance for members of the armed forces who were killed during World War I in the line of duty.

The red [remembrance poppy](#) has become a familiar emblem of Remembrance Day due to the poem "[In Flanders Fields](#)". These poppies bloomed across some of the worst battlefields of [Flanders](#) in World War I, their brilliant red colour an appropriate symbol for the blood spilled in the war.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, on this 2nd Sunday in November, we also remember and acknowledge those who died in WW 2 and other wars in our own country and across the globe.

In those years following WW1, the horror of this Great War was very fresh in people's minds, with all the devastation, carnage and overwhelming sense of personal and national grief. Remembrance Day was established with the following purposes in mind:

## The purpose of Remembrance Day

Firstly, it provided an opportunity for corporate sorrow and grieving for the countless lives lost in the violence of warfare. There was the chance to remember the deceased by name, praying that the sacrifice of their lives would not be in vain. (I wonder if any of you had parents, grandparents, relatives who died in these or other wars, or in situations of violence and conflict? Bring them, by name, to the Lord today). As communities of faith, we pray for families who have lost loved ones, in times of violence and conflict throughout the years. We hear again the words of Jesus in Gospel: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted", and the encouraging words of St Paul in our NT lesson (1 Thess 4) when he reminds us that as Christians we do not grieve as those who have no hope, because we believe that we shall be raised with Jesus and so always be with the Lord.

Secondly, at the heart of that 1st Remembrance Day, was a determination that such violence and outrage should never EVER happen again. Yet sadly this is so ironic, considering that 100 years after the outbreak of WW1, we see that humans are no better and have not learnt from this tragedy: still wounding and maiming and mass-slaughtering one another with unbelievable creativity and inventiveness. Today we pray for the day when the incessant carnage of war will finally come to an end- especially in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia, Central African

---

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Remembrance poppy," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Remembrance\\_poppy&oldid=633461688](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Remembrance_poppy&oldid=633461688) (accessed November 12, 2014).

Republic, Democratic republic of Congo, USA. We long and pray for the day when war shall be no more, and the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, Remembrance Day contained a clear undercurrent of **pride**. Pride in those ‘wonderful young soldiers’ who so bravely went off to fight and destroy a ‘dangerous and wicked enemy’. We see that pride in the many War Memorials throughout our country and across the world. In a moment we will hear the sounds of the military parade outside as cadets and school communities march onto Church Square to lay wreaths at the memorials behind the Cathedral. The inner walls of this church are filled with plaques honouring soldiers who fought the Frontier Wars of the Eastern Cape, long before WW1. Pride.

## What are we to make of war?

I must be honest and say that this particular aspect of Remembrance Day, national pride, releases in me a sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, I can understand the need to applaud and be proud of husbands, fathers and sons who put aside hopes of a normal life to risk injury and death in service of a ‘higher cause’.

Yet on the other hand, soldiers are trained, equipped, indoctrinated to deal out unspeakable **violence**— and do so legitimately – in pursuit of military ends. The enemy is dehumanised, an object to be annihilated. As a Christian, I really struggle with this. It makes me feel very uneasy and uncomfortable.

Acknowledging I might be stepping on dangerous ground, and walking where angels fear to tread, I dare to acknowledge I have serious misgivings about war. In doing so, I appreciate that this is a complex and controversial issue with no universal Christian voice on the matter. In my own family, one of my uncles was a military chaplain WW 2 and another was a conscientious objector – both Anglican clergy and deeply committed Christians. As I see it, War is never good – it is terrifying and it leaves huge permanent scars, physically and emotionally (and in every other possible way). Individual acts of bravery and self-sacrifice during a war can be good – extremely good and highly commendable – but war itself is not good. It is evil.

How ironic that people should believe violence can bring about peace! War almost never ends in peace – at least not in the kind of peace that brings former enemies to embrace one another, ask for forgiveness and wish one another well! No- peace simply means cease fire, after wreaking havoc and leaving trails of devastation and destruction. War ends in VICTORY for one, and DEFEAT for another. There are no winners - everyone loses.

As I understand the teachings of the NT, violence in the pursuit of any objective does not square well with the fundamental ethic of Christianity. Central to Christianity, is the repeated message to:

- Love your neighbour as yourself; (love is always better than hate)
- Love and Forgive your enemy; pray for those who persecute you (forgiveness is always better than revenge)
- Paul says that we have been entrusted with a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:11ff)
- From the Beatitudes today’s Gospel (Matt 5), Jesus says:
  - “Blessed are the meek- they will inherit the earth”
  - “Blessed are the merciful- they will receive mercy”
  - “Blessed are the peacemakers- they will be called children of God”

Once a war starts, these Christian values are cast aside. Where is place for acts of love and forgiveness? Where are the peacemakers?

How deeply it must grieve the heart of God to see his beloved children - on all sides of the conflict, all made in the image of God- fight to kill, maim and destroy one another. Does God take sides? Of course not! I suspect if each of us sitting here today went back in our family history, we might well find that some of our ancestors were involved in wars in the Eastern Cape on opposing sides. There is likely blood on all our hands.

## What about us here today?

Here in SA in 2014, our country is not at war per se right now. Yet we live in a violent society. Turning to acts of violence as a first, not last resort, seems to be the order of the day and the 'quick and easy' way to deal with conflict. On a daily basis we hear of domestic violence, sexual and physical abuse, rape, violent crime. Life is cheap – and guns are plenty. I remember a campaign some years back, promoting a "Gun free SA" – perhaps we need this now as never before.

So what message might there be for us sitting here today, in Grahamstown in 2014, in this Cathedral with its war memorials, on Remembrance Sunday? Maybe you are thinking- well I'm not about to go and fight in a war, nor do I have any power to persuade leaders of nations to end wars/conflict their countries are currently involved in.

So I want to turn our thoughts now to ourselves, on a very personal level. Let me begin by underlining the biblical truth given by Jesus in the Beatitudes - that ultimately it is the **peacemaker, not the peace lover**, who is blessed. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God"

Maybe I cannot make peace between nations at war, nor can I change the hearts of leaders of nations, but perhaps I can make peace in my individual and personal conflicts. I can be a 'minister of reconciliation' (2 Cor 5:11ff). It starts with my immediate relationships- with my spouse, my children, my friends, my colleagues... I dare to believe that if I am a person of peace, perhaps the people around me will 'catch' peacefulness – like a beautiful infection – and become persons of peace themselves. And maybe it'll spread wider and wider.

I also believe that we as a church, a Christian Community, are called to be peacemakers. We are to live our lives in such a way that peace is practiced and promoted, following in the steps of our Lord Jesus who is known as "The Prince of Peace".

## How might we practice peace on a personal level?

A few simple suggestions:

**First**, let us resolve to make it a practice never **ever** to do something with intent to hurt or harm another person (especially my husband, wife, members of my family) - no matter what the provocation! I will not hurt them physically, emotionally. Abuse in ANY FORM is totally unacceptable and has no place in the life of a Christian. I will not use unkind or cruel words to a person's face or behind their back. This includes gossip, which has the power to destroy a person and their reputation.

Acknowledging however that we are all sinners, and sometimes we do act or speak with intent to hurt, may we also be those who are quick to 'repent'; to apologize to the person and to God (give and receive forgiveness).

**Second**, I must learn to tame/control my own reaction to others. Watch out for impulsive, angry outbursts (seek professional help with anger management issues if necessary). Take responsibility for my actions. The Golden Rule is useful here: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Suppose someone makes me angry: if it had been the other way around – if I had made them angry – would I have wanted them to shout at me, "You stupid IDIOT!?" Would I have liked it if they had started to gossip about how annoying I am, telling others what a horrible person I am, a useless case, a good for nothing loser...?!

No, of course not; I would have hoped for a calm word, in private: "It hurt me when you did that. Let's talk about it" (Matt 18: 15ff gives guidelines for handling disagreements/differences). I would hope for an opportunity to talk things through, and resolve conflict in an adult way – talking, listening, and responding appropriately.

Jesus says that when someone offends you, pray for them – don't curse them; call down God's blessing upon them. It is hard to ask God to bless a person unless you yourself wish good things for that person, so this is a helpful discipline to practice.

May we strive to be willing to go first: to extend the hand of forgiveness and friendship, again and again and again, 70 x 7 and more.

**Third** – 20 years after democracy...we have come a long way but we still see the scars of our country's past. There remain racial, cultural and tribal tensions; economic, educational, social inequalities and divides...As a Cathedral family we are blessed to represent a range of people from 'Our rainbow nation'. Let us continue to celebrate and promote diversity here at the Cathedral. May we be an inclusive place where all are welcomed and embraced - regardless of language, race, culture, sexual orientation, gender... Let us continue to build bridges. Reach out across former divides. Be an example to the world around us.

And when we disagree, when we see things differently or have misunderstandings because of our different backgrounds (maybe the way I was brought up was different to yours...) – let us not become passive aggressive or lash out in anger, or 'storm out in an angry huff. Let us be peacemakers. Let us address issues with honesty while showing respect, always upholding the dignity and worth of one another. Let us approach one another in humility, ready to talk, listen, acknowledge that MY way is not the ONLY way or necessarily the RIGHT way, and learn from one another.

Let each one take ownership and responsibility to make this truly our church - not 'my church' and 'you' can come...but **our** church. We are a family, the family of God. God longs for us to live together in peace, to work for peace, to model peace.

## Conclusion

The Christian is first and foremost a person of peace.

On this Remembrance Day:

- As we remember those who lost their lives in war, situations of violence and conflict
- Let us continue to pray for an end to war and violence of any kind
- May we resolve to do all we can to live at peace with one another, loving our neighbours as ourselves, fulfilling our Christian calling to be peacemakers in all our relationships.

## Acknowledgements

In preparing for this sermon, I consulted various internet sources, which gave me ideas to work with, including most helpfully

- [Wikipedia](#)
- Sermons by Revd Canon Tony Harwood-Jones, Winnipeg Lest we forget (2007); Waging peace (2009)

All of which I acknowledge with thanks.