

Worcester Cathedral

Sermon on Remembrance Sunday 2023

James 3.13-18

Down the centuries there can rarely have been a time when people and nations have not experienced the fragility of life and the fragility of peace. In all times and in all places, instability is a given for the vast majority of the world's peoples. Even those whose personal circumstances are more secure than others, are also aware of the fragile balance of peace and harmony which might be shattered at any time.

For those who acknowledge this insecurity it feels like it is the worst it has been. Comparing one generation's experience with another, or indeed that of our own, may be futile, for most of us can only guess at the emotions and realities of people's lives from the past.

And yet I am sure I am not alone in hearing many people observing that we are now living through a time of such uncertainty in politics, global and national, that there is an air of insecurity, fear and despair. The realities of the climate crisis are now with us as an emergency; the cost of living crisis not only diminishes lives but strips all freedom and choice from the most vulnerable, and we gather this Remembrance Sunday not only with the ongoing war in Ukraine, but also the latest and bloodiest horrors of the most fragile situation in the Holy Land.

With this short list, outlining only the most visible or obvious crisis, we live in times of extreme chaos and conflict; it is no wonder that there is despair and fear.

How are we to live through such times? is a question that might be asked more easily by those of us on the edges of these dangers. For those in the midst of them the question is almost irrelevant; it is existence which takes all energy.

The temptation to attempt a solution to the most difficult of problems, at least in our head – to provide us with some sense of stability, is a strong one. From the comfort of our homes as we see again the horrors of war, we side, we decide, we sort, and we choose. There is some necessity for us to do so, but often it is without the full knowledge and experience, and of course it is rarely free from the inbuilt bias of personal circumstance and opinion.

One of my earliest memories of Remembrance Sunday is as a chorister in my parish church of Gresford in north Wales. Part way through the service we processed to the north porch, a memorial to the fallen of the two World Wars, and as the names were read we stood silent, cold, and numbed by the enormity of the solemnity.

As a child in the early 80s the veterans gathered with us were those from the second, and even some from the first, World War. As well as this vivid image I also recall the overriding message of both the vicar and those gathered: that in honouring the lives of the fallen, we were to continue the live for that which they fought. It wasn't merely peace, nor was it merely for justice – it was both of these but most strongly I heard, 'for freedom'.

Freedom has many aspects and forms, but in the aftermath of the Second world War, the newly established United Nations adopted a universal declaration of human rights. Such rights are so fundamental to what it means to be a citizen of this planet that they ought not to need writing down, let alone protecting, but the last century has shown us how often, how regularly, and how indiscriminately these rights are taken away from millions of our sisters and brothers. It is for these human rights, and for our freedoms, that wars still rage and conflicts scar our earth.

In dealing, dare we say coping, with these present times I often come back to a very simple yet vexing question: why do men and women resort to violence? When we are threatened we react and are right to do so, many of us will feel anger and a passionate, physical response perhaps out of all proportion. But, and this is the core of our hope in our human condition, for most of us even that deep anger and fear, does not translate into violence or brutality. What is true of us as individuals may still be true of us in our communal or national collectivism, though it is harder to restrain or manage.

These past weeks in the situation in Palestine and Israel, and over the past year and more in Ukraine, we have witnessed horrors of evil where life is taken at the blink of an eye, humanity trashed, and war normalised. I ask again, what is going on in the depths of a human mind, let alone a human heart, when the response is evil? The letter of James, from which we heard an extract earlier, contains a series of exhortations to a young Jewish Christian community teaching and encouraging endurance, faithfulness, and wisdom amidst the trials and temptations which surround them.

This morning's passage concentrates especially on wisdom and it is here that I see the beginnings of an answer as to why, when many of us despair at violence, that some are moved to vehement hatred and conflict: verse 16 'For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind'.

Throughout the centuries war has been one of those inevitable and sometimes necessary ways of fighting for peace, freedom and justice. In our gathering today we honour those who gave their lives in the service of humanity, those who live with the physical, mental and emotional wounds of war, and, later outside at the war memorial we pledge ourselves anew to the peace and welfare of the nations of the world.

To make this pledge we must look at ourselves. Some in this cathedral are called to the arena of war in very real ways, many of us are called, not to the battle, but to the fight for freedom and we begin with this pledge to start with ourselves. The news and all we experience at this present is at times overwhelming, and we will be drawn in many directions. But our honouring of the dead, our honouring of those who defend our human rights, compels us to train our hearts and minds in the way of peace.

This way is one of compassion and humanity, it is one which shuns all types of hatred and discrimination, it condemns the evils of antisemitism, islamophobia and myriad other deep rooted prejudices, and it calls us to seek our common humanity: to weep with those who weep, to mourn with those who mourn, and to sit in the present knowing that we are all members one of another.

The historian and theologian Donald Nicholl was Rector of an institute for unity and reconciliation in Southern Jerusalem in the 1980s. He wrote that Jerusalem was the most testing of cities to live in because it required you to exercise the virtue of justice every moment. 'How then', he asks, 'can you know if you have passed the test?' 'It is simple. If the spontaneous reaction of your heart on hearing of killings on either side is ideological ('they deserve it') rather than human, your heart is corrupted and you should go on pilgrimage till it is cleansed.'

All of us are called on that pilgrimage and it begins here in this ancient place where pilgrims have come for a thousand years. It continues as we move outside to the war memorial. But it never ends, the call to humanity draws us through life to the goal of God's kingdom of justice and righteousness, of peace and of compassion. It is not easy, it pulls us apart, but we must never waiver from the pilgrimage which ultimately leads us to love.

Stephen Edwards
Interim Dean