Remembrance Sunday 2021

Let us pray

Source of all light and hope:

As we remember the most awful failings of humanity this day

Instil in us hope for a different future

And the courage to make it our own

In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Read *The Soldier*

I first met that poem – like many of you I suspect – at school.

Unlike so much war poetry Rupert Brooke found no need – on this occasion at least - to spell out the evil reality of conflict.

Instead, the poem speaks of forgiveness, restoration and hope; that war cannot destroy everything that is beautiful and humane.

A voice from eternity calling us to remember, but also to rescue.

This year, Liz and I were in the car just before 11am on Thursday driving up to Leeds to spend the day with Becky and Fin, daughter and grandson.

The radio was on as we enjoy listening to Pop Master at 10.30 with Ken Bruce – Liz often manages 6 points, I rarely achieve even 3; and so we left the radio tuned to Radio 2 for the two minutes silence at 11am. Always a poignant occasion where ever one is, it felt more so to be united with millions of others through a radio that was unusually filled with silence.

What struck me was the universal nature of Ken Bruce’s introduction to the silence in which we he stressed that we were remembering all casualties of war. The focus on those who had served in our armed forces was now extended to include all who suffer.

Wikipedia maintains a list of current conflicts around the world and it makes sobering reading.

There are currently 48 involving annual death tolls exceeding 100 people, 4 involving annual death tolls exceeding 10,000 each. The oldest conflict in the world today – Kashmir – dates back to 1947. The newest – Russia and Ukraine – could be just around the corner.

As we grow ever distant from the war that began the Remembrance tradition, it strikes me as entirely right to remember that war is an ongoing facet of man’s inhumanity to man.

And I use the term man deliberately, for there is no escaping the truth that war remains an activity almost exclusively started and undertaken by men, with women and children as the primary victims. War is a gender issue.

The roots of war lie in our inadequate grasp of what it is to be a human being. We limit our self-understanding by defining ourselves by what makes us in our eyes superior to other people. Repeat this between competing egos on the world stage and conflict is inevitable.

The eradication of war must begin with a desire to celebrate difference, not marginalise it; to accept equality as a virtue, not as a weakness; to embrace curiosity in others as something that might deepen our understanding of ourselves; to value the uniqueness of every human being made in the image of God.

We also need to re-visit our definitions. For, as COP26 shows, the world is at serious risk of even greater catastrophe than war between nations; for there is a long running – 300 year-old war – between the nations and the planet, and this is one searing war that the planet must win.

Remembering only makes sense if there is purpose to it; an action that results that makes our future different to our past.

So, as we renew our commitment to peace this morning, may we do so with an authenticity that is going to last longer than today. We needn’t become world peace-makers to achieve this. We can start with the way we relate to those we find most difficult: a smile, an embrace, an apology. To fail in these small ways, is to allow the internal dis-ease within us to damage ourselves even more than it has already. And it is that internal pain and anger that lingers deep within that will allow failed politicians to justify war on our behalf. A country at peace with itself, never needs to go to war.

Which reminds us that war is never someone else’s responsibility or problem: it is always ours.

The ten commandments offer an ethical model that is unpopular today, rooted as it is in absolutes. Yet, Jesus’ equivalent: love God, yourself and neighbour, is equally unequivocal.

War – whether against the planet or our neighbour – is a deeply flawed representation of the best humanity can achieve.

We truly want the alternative – the Kingdom of God as Jesus described it in the sermon on the mount; what we have yet to realise, is that it is already ours; no one can take it away from us, except ourselves.

Amen.