

REMEMBRANCE

Sermon preached at Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton, Ontario, on Remembrance Sunday, 12 November 2023, by Bishop Terry Brown. Text: Matthew 25: 1-13.

May only the truth be spoken here, and only the truth be heard. Amen.

Today we are marking Remembrance Day, remembering in thanksgiving those who have given their lives for their country in wars – initially the Great War (World War 1) but, later, other wars. The scope of that war, including its losses, is still hard to imagine. A few years ago, I visited the Canadian monument at Vimy Ridge in France. The 11,285 names carved in the stone and the enormous weeping figures were almost overwhelming.

Strangely, too, wars never end. On Guadalcanal Island in Solomon Islands, where I worked, there are enormous quantities of unexploded ordinance from World War 2. A few years ago, members of a family died when they made a BBQ pit in their backyard, igniting a bomb underneath. Every year, bombs continue to explode. The Government continues to advocate at the United Nations for the US and Japan to clear their unexploded ordnance from 80 years ago. Unexploded bombs and landmines around the world remind us how destructive wars are to the environment. Even at Vimy, there are still unexploded bombs, and one does not dare go off the pathway.

We know, of course, that war, deep down, represents a failure of humanity somewhere, even when a war is pursued on high moral grounds. God created us to love one another, not to kill, maim, and destroy one another. Somewhere, someplace, something has gone wrong, and I believe it is not a good enough excuse to blame the violence on “original sin” or some innate depravity. God has created us to love: to love God and love one another. “This is the first and great commandment, and the second is like unto it ...”

My own view of war was shaped by being drafted (or conscripted) into the US Army in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, after I had decided to leave graduate school. Not wanting to kill, I volunteered to do medical work, and so for 18 months I worked on a septic wounds ward in a US Army hospital in Japan, treating the worst of US casualties of the Vietnam War. The images of terribly wounded and maimed bodies are burnt into my memory. During the experience, and coming out of it, I felt the sheer brutality and tragedy of war, and vowed that I would always try to be on the side of peace and reconciliation, being a part of peaceful organizations and governments, including the church, rather than those that encourage and promote conflict and war.

Yet, as much as we individually may seek peace, wars still go ahead, often fueled by religious beliefs and ancient hatreds, or ideologies of “the other” as the enemy. And there is also the difficult ethical issue of self-defence – what to do when we are unexpectedly attacked by another, especially for values we hold deeply. The church in the Middle Ages developed a “just

war” theory, to justify when it was morally correct to go to war. But recently even Pope Francis has questioned that theory. He writes in a 2020 encyclical:

We can no longer think of war as a solution, because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits. In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a ‘just war.’ Never again war!”

What then can we say on this Remembrance Sunday?

First, appreciate deeply and pray for those who have lost their lives in war, or who have been badly injured, or who have lost loved ones. Recognize and appreciate the enormous loss and be careful in assigning blame. (My own experience of the US Army was that I was surrounded by black and Puerto Rican ghetto folk and uneducated whites, who had little choice in being there and no opportunity for deferments or an escape to Canada.) People often get caught up in wars innocently or with the best of intent. Appreciate this contribution, give thanks for the sacrifice, both with mourning and, as Christians, with hope of the Resurrection. God has a strange way of turning disaster into good, death into life, and we thank God for those who have died so that we may live peaceably.

Secondly, pray for peace. Commend to God all the bleeding points of humanity in this broken world. Pray for everyone: civilians, combatants, all parties, allies, enemies. One remembers, for example, the 1982 sermon of then Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie at the Thanksgiving Service at St. Paul’s Cathedral after the Falklands War, that so enraged Margaret Thatcher. Himself a heroic tank commander in World War 2, Runcie preached, “War is a sign of human failure, and everything we say and do in this service must be in that context.” He went on to express sympathy and pray for both Britons and Argentinians who had lost their lives in the war. As Christians, our vision and our love are broad and envelope even those who harm us or wish to harm us and our friends.

Prayer also promotes and encourages empathy for all: victims, combatants, civilians, even enemies. Of course, we condemn what is clearly wrong: hostage-taking, cruelty, needless deaths of civilians, war profiteers, war-mongering politicians, and idolatrous theologies and ideologies of violence and domination. Yet, we still try to understand why people do what they do and try to enter their lives with the genuine love of Christ. All are God’s children, even the cruelest terrorist or most corrupt and scheming politician. We are called to discernment, especially when answers are not easy, and situations are complex and confused.

Thirdly, it is important not to fall into hatred ourselves. Jesus, of course, commends turning the other cheek and a willingness to endure loss of property or even one’s life for the sake of love. Out of the current Israel-Hamas conflict, both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are increasing in Canada and around the world. There are not only warriors on the ground and in tunnels, but many keyboard warriors, often spreading hatred and misinformation. Much is to be said for the advice of the Epistle of James (1: 19-20): “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and

slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.” Of course, there are clearly times to speak, but always let our words be words of love, not hatred. That is also a message for our politicians today, many of whom have made the Parliament of Canada into an adolescent food fight.

Today’s Gospel is the story of the ten bridesmaids, five wise, five foolish. Five have brought oil for their lamps, five have not. It is tempting to regard the latter as just a bit clueless, then I think how many times I cannot find any batteries when the battery in some device or another goes flat. The story is told in the context of the Last Day and return of the Lord: Be ready, you do not know what hour He is coming. Indeed, we do not know what hour death will come to any of us.

But more generally, I believe we can also read the passage as about being prepared for whatever situation we might find ourselves in, including situations of hatred and violence, where the love of Christ needs to be quickly and strongly present. Though a different event, another biblical reference to lamps and oil is in Luke 12: “Keep your loins girded and your lamps burning and be like those who are waiting for their master to return home from the marriage feast, so that when he returns from the wedding and comes and knocks, they may open to him immediately.” The image here is more dynamic: the long robe hitched up into the belt and the lamps always burning, always ready. Indeed, the old Scout motto may have some biblical roots: Be prepared!

Be prepared for what? Be prepared to welcome Christ-like love when it enters our community through kindness and generosity, perhaps in the person of a stranger. Always be ready to welcome and offer hospitality. Be ready for refugees and the broken. But also, sadly, be ready for potential division and hatred, whether in church or society, and develop the gift of being a reconciler. Be ready to listen and not talk all the time. Be ready to be diminished, if necessary, so that others may flourish. In the Bible, oil not only burns to give light and warmth. It also is used to anoint and heal. It is a sign of the spirit. Let the Spirit burn brightly.

Finally, to return to Remembrance Day for a moment. In preparing this sermon I came across a Canadian poet that I had not heard of before, Marjorie Pickthall, born in 1883, probably the most famous Canadian woman poet of her time. She died young, at only 39. Her earliest primary education was with the Community of the Sisters of the Church in their school on Beverley Street in Toronto, the later St. Mildred’s College. She lived in England during World War 1 and was horrified by the war’s devastation. One of her poems, “Marching Men,” shockingly likens the soldiers going off to war to Christ going to Calvary. It is very short, and I shall read it.

Under the level winter sky
I saw a thousand Christs go by.
They sang an idle song and free
As they went up to Calvary.

Careless of eye and coarse of lip,

They marched in holiest fellowship.
That heaven might heal the world, they gave
Their earth-born dreams to deck the grave.

With souls unpurged and steadfast breath
They supped the sacrament of death.
And for each one, far off, apart,
Seven swords have rent a woman's heart.

We may be shocked by the comparison of soldiers going to their deaths to Christ going to his, but the poem conveys the utter tragedy of war, both for those who die and for those who are left behind. Calvary, however, also suggests the Resurrection that is to follow: a better world in our true heavenly home, the first fruits of sacrifice, thanksgiving for those who have given their lives, and a deep re-commitment for working for peace. For that, we are called to be prepared and, as well as we are able, to be Christ's just and peace-making love in this broken and violent world. And in these days especially, pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Amen.