

## St Andrew's on the Terrace Sunday 10 November Pentecost 22 Armistice

### Readings for the Gathering

#### Hebrew Bible

Isaiah 2:4

And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

#### Gospel

Matthew 5: 21-26

<sup>21</sup> "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder,<sup>[a]</sup> and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister<sup>[b][c]</sup> will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,'<sup>[d]</sup> is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. <sup>23</sup> "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup> "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup> Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

#### Contemporary reading

**From** 'When were white poppies invented and by whom?' by Aiden Milan

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Monday, 11 November is Armistice Day, with Remembrance Sunday – always the second Sunday in November – being the day before. In the days and even weeks before these solemn days, people will don poppies to show their support for the Armed Forces. While red poppies are common, the white poppy has been another option available for nearly 100 years. When were white poppies invented? White remembrance poppies were first sold in 1933 by members of the Women's Co-operative Guild who had mourned the loss of loved ones on World War One. In 1934 the Peace Pledge Union started distributing the white poppy as an alternative commemoration symbol. The use of the white poppy as a symbol for peace began in 1926 by people who were in favour of ending all war.

Imperial War Museum Symon Hill, Campaigns Manager at the Peace Pledge Union, previously wrote for Metro.co.uk: 'White poppies are not a generic peace symbol. Nor are they a protest against remembrance. Quite the opposite: they are a symbol of remembrance for people who have died or suffered in war. That's why we wear them on Remembrance Day. 'White poppies also represent a commitment to peace. This follows from remembering the horrors of war. We never say red poppies glorify war – we know many red poppy wearers share many of our values. 'Instead, we challenge ways in which remembrance is misused to promote a positive image of war or dodgy claims about what war has supposedly achieved.' He continued: 'My white poppy doesn't mean I'm against remembrance. I wear it precisely because I believe in remembrance so much. Remembering the past means recognising its complexities, asking difficult questions, learning from history. If we don't learn from the past, we are condemned to repeat it.'

#### Reflection for the Gathering

On different Armistice Sundays I have been arrested by the memory of this sculpture. I may have used it at St Andrew's and today I want to again. By a Russian artist, it was gifted to the UN by the USSR in 1959. So far, not unusual. But the sculpture has as its theme the beating of swords into ploughshares. This is the image used by the prophet Isaiah, writing centuries before Christ, to describe the hoped-for effect in a world where God reigned. That a communist government should gift a sculpture based on the Christian scriptures is an amazing symbol of the eternal significance of the Scripture's wisdom and the way even a communist government which has eschewed religion, can recognise that wisdom.

In another biblical image, the cessation of war is pictured thus “Then each of you will eat fruit from your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, until I come and take you to a land like your own—a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey. Choose life and not death!”

The symbolism here is that a people need peace to see a grape harvest come to fruition. Fig trees take years to first fruit. A land where there is grain to make bread and grapes to make wine is one where there is peace; no battles being fought in the fields; no invading armies requisitioning provisions. A land of olive trees and honey is where olive orchards can thrive and bees are not interrupted in their work, but have abundant growing things around them to provide nectar. This kind of lifestyle requires peace, not a war-ravaged landscape. People at peace have the confidence to settle and plant gardens and farms and tend them knowing there will be a result. Indeed, their swords can be safely transformed into ploughshares and pruning hooks, in fact must be for them to survive.

So often on an Armistice Day, we focus on the horrible numbers who suffered and died, especially in World War I, still thought of as the deadliest this contemporary earth has known. Tens of millions of people dead, both military and civilians, and stories are still emerging out of the physical and psychological damage which many suffered and which may still be affecting following generations. Numbers that large lose definition for us. They are many times the population of this country. They stretch way beyond our comprehension. Ken Follet’s vivid description of the delivery of telegrams in a Welsh mining village after the local regiment was involved in the battle of the Somme brings home the tragedy which struck so many households. One reviewer summarises it: *The slaughter at Somme, horrific enough, is followed by Telegram Day. After whole companies are wiped out, often composed of boys and men from the same village, death notices arrive by telegram. A boy on a bike makes the deliveries, stopping at house after house along the street. Townspeople stand outside, hoping the boy on the bike will pass them by.* I remember the passage vividly describing women waiting at their front gates, unnerved by screams and cries of the women before them further down the row of terraced houses in their street. I remember the part where one woman refuses to take the envelope from the telegraph boy who begs to her to take it because there are many more back at the post office which he will have to deal with that day.

When the red poppy pays respect to those who have died in battle, however opposed we might be to war, it is simply a mark of respect not only towards them but also families torn apart and never the same again. Now we seem to have matured to the point where we can also include in that respect soldiers on the opposing side who bleed red blood just as we do and whose families were similarly torn apart from grief and pain.

To wear a white poppy does not negate that innate respect for those who put their lives on the line whatever their motive or their understanding of what they were doing and why; for those who felt the fear and did it anyway; for those who lost their innocence; for those who lived through hell; for those who came back to a country and relatives who might be grateful but could not fully understand what they had gone through.

It also pays respect, as we will later in Shirley Murray’s hymn, to those who stood against the tenor of the day and refused to go to war; likewise for those above, they felt the fear of being ostracised and did it anyway; they lost their innocence as their objections were reviled by others; they lived through hell when they were sent, wrongly, to the front; they knew a country and relatives who did not understand what on earth they were doing and shamefully, they knew a church which did not get the point either as Basil Dowling and others found to their cost.

The Gospel reading challenges us not to leave the responsibility for living peaceably along to the diplomats, politicians or military commanders. It challenges us to **not** think that peace or war is the sole responsibility of others out there, somewhere else that where we are.

Jesus points us to a very fine and precise and specific definition of what is wrong and what is right. His audience there on the mountainside that day – (for this passage from Matthew is part of the Sermon on the Mount), knew they were not supposed to murder each other. Jesus extrapolates the act of murder back to its common motive: anger. My mother used to remind my brothers of the next verse – who ever calls his brother a fool is liable to judgment. Yet how often have we thought of others as fools?

And I wonder how many of us would come to communion if we took this verse seriously: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” It could make for a disruptive communion service if we were all dodging out the door to make amends if we needed! This is why in some churches confessions is a prerequisite before taking the eucharist and examination by the elders before communion in former Presbyterian custom. This was on the basis that since Jesus death was not a light matter we in our turn should not take it commemoration lightly either.

The last few verses of the Gospel reading, you might have noticed, seem extremely punitive, but this is a device to show us how important our feelings and attitudes are as well as any actions we might take. We might not condone people murdering or killing others, but how much do we excuse ourselves for feeling angry and unforgiving towards another person – feeling justified in our dislike or hate or strong attitudes, continuing to hold a grudge or to send someone to Coventry?

Recently, SATRS ran a non-violent communication course. Perhaps these should be mandatory in schools so that school children learned to communicate very day in ordinary ways non violently and to think before they communicate. I have mentioned before the servant leadership school of the Church of the Saviour in Washington DC ran a course on “How to have difficult conversations” I haven’t been able to find the exact contents of that course, but perhaps that should be mandatory for all prospective church members. So often we are too nice to each other rather than honest. Yet how can we speak the truth without being damaging and hurtful? It is a skill I am still learning. If anyone else has it sussed, let me know. Would you like to have a difficult conversation with an angry person? Or would a constructive discussion get there more easily?

We attempted one year here to sing a peace song which I first met in Catholic circles. The tune is tricky to sing, and we didn’t know it well, but you will recognise the words: “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” The final verse goes: “With ev’ry step I take/ Let this be my solemn vow/ To take each moment and live /Each moment in peace eternally/ Let there be peace on earth /And let it begin with me”

Each of us can be a locus of peace and a starting point for ripples of peace to spread out across the pond of the world.

Peace however is not only calm and quiet Peace must be robust and honest and just. To maintain such a world requires many difficult conversations. It will require us going to meet the Other in places where we do not find it comfortable. It will require us getting to know people so we understand where they are coming from. It will require refusing to deal only in stereotypes. It will require **not** writing others off as irritating or annoying. It will require us not to be patronising and dismissive of the other’s rights and responsibilities.

It will also require us to know ourselves and what triggers us into rage, annoyance, fear or anger. Sometimes we act out of emotions which are unconsciously buried within, carry-overs from past trauma. Something someone says can suddenly catapult us back to when we were 4 or 5 years old, frightened by the big, scary world. Suddenly it is as if we are that 4 or 5 year old again. In the moment, we are no longer the mature, wise adult we have grown to be.

It is sad that within churches – and I know, I have six different parish experiences at my back now and I can tell you this is true – there are many times in churches when people do not get on, or are engaged in power struggles or treat people violently without even raising their voice, let alone raising a hand to strike. It can look good from the outside but be toxic within. And yet also, people can be too nice, not speaking up when they need to or allowing things to pass because it is easier that way. You can see that upskilling ourselves on our self-awareness and our communication skills is a lifetime job.

Churches are very different from each other and yet uncannily the same. Diverse people comprise each faith community, but the same characteristics are there. We all expect a lot from church, sometimes more than a human community can manage, so patience and tolerance and understanding goes a long way. Outsiders expect a lot from church too even though they may choose to never darken the doors. We are expected by them to be perfect even though we may have given up that unrealistic goal years ago, knowing that we are called to be complete and whole, not perfect.

As in our church, so also in our homes, and so also in our society and so too living globally. Living with others is complex and challenging. If only they were all reasonable people like we are, working to the same set of cultural mores! An old Lancashire joke my mother used to tell seems apposite. “The world’s gone mad ‘cept thee and me and something I wonder about thee”. But, not everyone is like us. The challenge for them and for us, is to understand each other, to learn how they can ‘hear’ us and to help them to know how we will best ‘hear’ them. That takes energy and effort.

In the first part of a prayer from 1940, Reinhold Niebuhr, famous American Presbyterian preacher encapsulated the wisdom we need in order to make and keep peace; when we should employ that and when we should rest from striving:

God grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
And wisdom to know the difference.

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