

Learning the Lessons of War

Readings: Isaiah chapter 2, verses: 2-5; Matthew chapter 5, verses 1-11

Its 100 years ago this week that the 1st World War began. All this week we have been reminded of the terrible impact the 1st world war had on, both the men who fought in it, the families, and in fact, the impact it has had on our world even today. It was supposed to be the war to end all wars and the carnage was terrible. Yet 21 years later the world was plunged into another global conflict with the same nations involved plus many others. Ever since there has not been a single year without a war going on somewhere. And today the Middle East is in turmoil threatening yet another global conflict. Yet it is that 1st World-War which has scarred the memory and filled the news and provides a reason for us to reflect.

So what can we learn from that horrific conflict? Why should we remember?

1. We learn that it is possible to win the war but lose the peace.

After the first World War the defeat of the Germans was marked by the Treaty of Versailles. That treaty was designed to humiliate an already beaten enemy. It was also designed to exact retribution. The Germans were forced to pay enormous sums by way of reparation and there was no way in which they could pay. The result was a smouldering resentment. Hitler came to power on the back of that resentment and the economic penalties that came with peace. He tapped into the sense of grievance and injustice created by the Peace Treaty and used it as a power base. Another conflict became inevitable. We lost the peace.

Fortunately after the 2nd World war the allies acted differently. Instead of grinding a beaten foe into the ground they instituted the Marshall Plan by which the crippled economy might be rebuilt. By so doing they ensured that the enemy would become an ally. They eliminated any sense of grievance and injustice which could fester in the future. They had learned their lesson. So today we remember in order to learn from the past and avoid repeating the mistakes which might give rise to future conflict.

2. We learn that we should forgive but not forget.

So many people say that we must "forgive and forget", but it is a very glib saying and it isn't true. It is quite impossible to forget. There is no way in which you can simply erase something from the memory as if you were hitting the *delete* button on the computer. And, even if you could, it would be wrong to do so. Forgetting is one thing. Forgiving is another thing altogether. And, whilst we can't forget, we must learn to forgive.

All too often we think of forgiveness in emotional terms. The result is a lot of sentimental nonsense is produced. Real forgiveness is much harder than that. To forgive is to draw a line under the past. It is a conscious decision. And drawing a line under the past means that you refuse to allow the past to dictate your actions in the future. The memory remains, but that memory is not allowed to poison the new situation or the new relationship.

This is not easy to achieve. But it can be done. In South Africa a genuine attempt has been made inspired by one man. I don't believe that Nelson Mandela ever forgot the years he spent on Robben Island, or the indignities he suffered. But he realised that there was no future for him or his country if memory issues in endless recrimination or retribution. So he drew a line under the past and put all his energies into rebuilding a society free of the injustices he suffered.

On the other hand in the Middle East and in Europe the memory of the past is simply carried over into the present and the future with no attempt at forgiveness. The hostility between Jew and Arab goes back over thousands of years. The hostility between Protestant and Catholic in Northern

Ireland goes back hundreds of years. The ancient grievances and injustices fuel present attitudes and conflict persists. 'Apprentice boys' (*most of them over 60 years old!*) still insist on marching in memory of ancient conflicts, and such marches are simply provocative. They succeed in making the old conflict contemporary. Nobody is prepared to say, "Enough is enough". Nobody is prepared to draw a line under what has happened and to start working for a new order in society.

So we learn that we must forgive even when we cannot and must not forget.

3. We learn that true peace is not an end in itself but a by-product.

It is the by-product of a relationship with God expressed in true worship.

Studdert Kennedy once said that when you change your Government you put one lot of sinners out and another lot of sinners in. He wasn't just being cynical. He was being utterly realistic. We got rid of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and now ISIS threatens an even worse dictatorship. We got rid of Gadaffi in Libya and today that country is in total chaos. It isn't just new Treaty Agreements that we need. Nor is it new weapons systems. There is an added Christian dimension to all talk of peace. And that added dimension is clear from Scripture.

Remember the words of Isaiah. He gave us a picture of Jerusalem, the City of God, established high above the surrounding countryside. And, in his mind's eye, he sees the nations streaming towards the city:

"Come let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob"

Why?

"That he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths"

The truth behind that view is this: that when men and women worship God aright then peace is the result. For to worship rightly is to have our minds nourished by His truth, our imaginations purified by His beauty, our wills orientated around His Will. To worship rightly is to love God, and no one who loves God can hate his brother at one and the same time.

Exactly the same truth was expressed in the song of the angels at the birth of Jesus:

"Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace among men".

Peace the consequence of worship! – or so it should be. And this is the added Christian component we have to proclaim and live out in our lives. If we fail to sound this note we fail in our responsibility to our fellows.

So we remember Scripture and we remember to worship. It is as we "go to the house of the Lord" that we hear His word, are taught His ways, and brought into relationship with Him.

As a result, men will beat their swords into plough-shares, their spears into pruning-hooks, their ballistic missiles into appropriate technology and study war no more.