

# Remembrance Sunday

*Readings: Isaiah chapter 2, verses 1 – 4: Matthew chapter 5, verses 1 – 11 & 43 – 48*

On Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> November we shall rightly celebrate Remembrance Day and in silence remember those who have lost their lives in time of war. We shall anticipate that silence in our service today. There is no way that this Remembrance should be interpreted as glorifying war; but it still leaves many people uncomfortable. And it raises the question of whether engaging in war is compatible with being a Christian.

There is no easy answer. Christians are right to feel uncomfortable because, when you look at the teaching and example of Jesus it seems that being a pacifist is the only stance to take. Jesus commanded us to love our enemies and bombing them to bits is hardly compatible with that. So where do we stand today?

For hundreds of years Christians have used the doctrine of a **Just War** to justify their participation. That doctrine lays down a series of criteria which must be met if we are to take up arms. The trouble is that the nature of modern warfare has overtaken those criteria and we have to start again from scratch.

Undoubtedly Jesus commanded a pacifist stance. But the question remains — was Jesus talking in the context of personal relationships or international relationships? It's one thing to turn the other cheek when we are personally attacked; but does it apply when one nation declares war on another? Do we simply stand by and do nothing when Hitler unleashes war in Europe or when the Islamic State creates murderous mayhem as in Syria today? I offer some thoughts for your consideration.

How do we understand the command to love our enemies? In the context of personal relationships this may require us not to retaliate in like manner. But, as one eminent theologian has said, in the context of international relationships "**justice is love distributed**". And the fact is that most conflicts originate in a sense of injustice which boils over into warfare. So it was that the humiliating reparations demanded of Germany at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War fuelled the rise of Hitler. And the injustices which followed upon the Iraq war 10 years ago have fuelled the rise of the Islamic State. As Christians we have a responsibility to cut the causes of war off at their source and that means ensuring that justice is done. As the Old Testament prophet, Amos put it in memorable words: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream". To love your enemy means to do justice and ensure that justice is done.

Secondly this: – We live in a world where evil has infected every part and there is no escaping it. Evil, in the form of selfishness and a 'will to power' has infected our innermost being. It has infected our personal relationships. It has infected our relationships in society, and it has spilled over into our international relationships. There is no escaping the reality and the all pervasiveness of evil. Which is to say that very often the only choice we have is not between doing good or evil. It is having to choose between two evils. And the Christian responsibility is to choose the lesser evil.

War can never be a Good. It is always an evil. If we engage in it then it is because we judge it to be the lesser of two evils. Let us not pretend otherwise.

Nicholas Monssarat in his book "The Cruel Sea" has an illustration of this dilemma. Set in the context of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War it tells of a British destroyer on one the Arctic convoys bringing supplies to Russia. One ship in the convoy was torpedoed by a German submarine and many of the sailors jumped overboard into the freezing sea. The destroyer moved in to pick up the survivors. Just then its ASDIC picked up the underwater signals of the submarine still in the vicinity and the captain was faced with an appalling decision. Rescue his fellow countrymen from the water and

risk being torpedoed himself.? Or depth-charge the submarine and in the process blow his fellow countrymen out of the water at the same time.? Nor did he have time to debate the question. So he gave the order "Drop depth-charges" – and in the next breath said "Lord have mercy".

That is the proper Christian response to war. "Lord have mercy". It is even more appropriate if we are the victors in warfare. There can be no place for extravagant rejoicing; even less for triumphalism. For to have engaged in conflict is to have chosen an evil and the only justification we can possibly offer is that we chose a lesser evil.

Remembrance Sunday is not only a matter of remembering. That is one aspect. And it is an important one. We should never forget the sacrifices made, and that sea of poppies cascading down the walls of the Tower of London today and filling the surrounding moat are a powerful reminder of those who died. Were you to include a poppy for every German soldier killed and every civilian killed then the Thames itself would flow blood-red. And that's just the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. We must remember else we are doomed to repeat history itself.

But remembrance must lead to action in the here and now. And the proper course of action is to fight against the injustices rampant in our society and in our world. Ignore them; or perpetuate them and we are doomed to have a repetition.

And remembrance must lead to penitence. "Lord have mercy upon us" is the appropriate Christian response to Remembrance Day. And real penitence leads to action.

**"Make me a channel of your peace"**