

Remembering: Sermon Preached on 12th November 2023

(Remembrance Sunday)

Preached at St John's, Devizes

Readings – Micah 4: 1–5; Romans 8: 35–39

Henry Allingham died in the year 2009, at the age of a hundred and thirteen, as the oldest man in the world. An air mechanic, he was the last survivor of the Battle of Jutland, and later served with the air reconnaissance units supporting the offensive at Passchendaele.

For eight long decades, Henry tried to forget what he'd seen on the Western Front. It was only towards the end of his life that he began to open up about what he remembered. Then, it was obvious why he'd wanted to forget. He once said that his Remembrance Day was the 22nd of September, when he lost three mates. He spoke of men standing in two feet of water in mud-filled trenches waiting to go over the top, knowing exactly what their likely fate was. He once spent a night in a shell hole. "It stank," he said. "So did I when I fell into it. Arms and legs, dead rats, dead everything. Rotten flesh. Human guts."

It is more comfortable, in some ways, to forget. So why do we remember? One reason is the sense of duty that we rightly feel to honour those who made the supreme sacrifice. Another important reason for remembering is because those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.

But to remember also means something else. The word 'member' can mean a body part; indeed originally that was its only English meaning. Member is a word that came into English, via Norman French, from the Latin word *membrum*, which means limb. The word remember also has its root in this Latin word, *membrum*. So to re-member someone is literally to put their limbs together again. When we remember the dead, we bring them to life in our hearts and souls.

We bring to life the young men saying goodbye to their sweethearts on the platform of Devizes station on their way to the trenches, thinking it would all be over by Christmas. We bring to life the dashing young pilots pulling stunts as they trained over Salisbury Plain before heading to their deaths over Hitler's Germany. We bring to life the sailors making a brief, crackling, telephone call to their wives and children back home before their ship was hit by an Exocet missile in the South Atlantic.

It is right that we remember them, and that we remember them as they lived and not only as they died. At this time when the clouds of war are gathering more darkly across the world than they have for a generation, let us also remember the survivors, and the vision that animated so many of their lives when they returned from war—of a world where peace is truly cherished, and for the means for nations to resolve their disputes without resort to arms.

For as long as human beings have fought violently against one another, we have also dreamed of a time when war would be no more.

Our first reading this morning was a vision of a written by a man who had seen peace crumble after the international political situation changed suddenly. His name was Micah, and he lived around 2,700 years ago. He experienced a devastating invasion of his country by an Assyrian Emperor who expanded his realm by violent conquest and all the horrors that still come with rulers consumed by such nightmarish fantasies—deportations of whole peoples, terrible suffering, especially of the defenceless young and elderly and, in the end, a fragile and compromised ceasefire.

That warmongering Emperor was eventually killed by his own son; but it is the vision of Micah, a man of learning from a humble background, which inspires the best in people across the centuries, perhaps because of the deep longing in his words. They are obviously not a sort of pipe-dream from someone naïve about the human condition, but a vision of hope for justice and peace springing from bitter experience of how horrible war is.

True and lasting peace so often seems impossible. But as our second reading reminds us, if we seek to turn a vision of a world of peace into reality, we are not alone: for nothing can separate us from the love of God—a God who is love, and who loves each and every human being as his son or daughter, across every division of nation and creed and colour and class.

To honour the dead, to ensure their sacrifice was not in vain, we must put together again for our own times, which are much darker than we could have imagined even a few years ago, the vision that inspired those who were lucky enough to return. As we remember the dead, let us also rediscover the hope and passion of those who survived, for creating a world where nation no longer lifts up sword against nation, where people no longer learn war any more.

Amen.