

Sermon for Remembrance Sunday

St John the Evangelist, 9th Nov 2025 (Rev J. Shakespeare)

*O God, lead us from death to life,
From falsehood to truth.
Lead us from despair to hope,
From fear to trust.
Lead us from hate to love,
From war to peace.
Let peace fill our hearts, our world, our universe. Amen.*

Words of John McCrae, written in 1915, shortly after losing a friend in Battle-

*"In Flanders field the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
That marks our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below*

*We are dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw the sunset glow.
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields"*

It was or was meant to be, 'the war to end all wars', and over 100 years ago John McCrae and other poets (among them Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke, formerly of Kings Coll, Cambridge & Robert Binyon) dared to articulate both the tragedy of war and the passionate hope of peace: that somehow their loss, their blood – represented, by these poppies - may yet herald a yearned for peace: good coming out of evil.

And on Tuesday, at 11 O'clock, on the 11th day of the 11th month, the nation will again fell silent (as we do this morning), to commemorate the signing of the Armistice, and to remember and pay tribute to all those who fought and died in WW1, and in wars and conflicts since, to this very day – still living, as we do, at a time of seemingly perennial conflict, whether it be Ukraine, Sudan, or the ever so fragile ceasefire, between Israel & Gaza.

My own family story, like most of ours, is interwoven with memories of war. I always remember my grandfather – who as a young Cambridge undergraduate, at Emmanuel College, in 1914 was called up and fought at Gallipoli, miraculously surviving battle, yet his youth yet scarred by war. And I remember him telling me stories of those war-torn years & the courage with which ex-soldiers and civilians rebuilt their lives, after demobilisation.

But somehow those tragic images of WW1 (the 1st truly global war) have been seared into our collective unconscious: images of muddy wastelands, barbed wire, trenches, dugouts and (from film makers) slow motion footage of men stumbling hopelessly over the top. The poppies of Flanders Fields, forever remaining a potent symbol of remembrance- and of every young life lost. Every city, town & village across the land, including our own parish here in Hills Road, affected; as they were in WW2, and (for many) in more recent conflicts, in Afghanistan & elsewhere. And for each of our families, there is a memory of loved ones, lost or maimed in conflict. Behind every war, every conflict – then, as now, in Ukraine, Gaza & Sudan – a human face, a story to be told.

And on Remembrance Sunday, we remember, of course, not only the iconic and tragic significance of WW1 & WW2, but that 20th Century of war and conflict that was tragically ushered in, and all that has followed since, to this very day, in this already unsettled 21st Century – illustrated by

our own Ukraine Prayer Station, our local involvement with the Cambridge Convoy for Refugees, and many of us actively committed to the present plight of the people of Gaza.

We live at a time, in many parts of the world, when the forces of disunity & hatred could quite easily overwhelm the forces of love and peace, when the bonds of faith and shared humanity could be rent asunder, when the need for a shared commitment to peace, as well as defending human rights, and protecting the most vulnerable, could not be more urgent.

So it's vital, in our remembering today, that we remember not only the fallen of two world wars, but those cruelly impacted by war and conflict since; re-committing ourselves to peace-making, as well as praying for those still maimed by war & terror, for their families and all affected- in Ukraine, in the Near East, in Africa, and for refugees worldwide.

'Blessed are the peacemakers' Jesus taught. + So today as we prepare, later, for our 'act of commitment', we are invited to strive together for peace, to care for the vulnerable, and to protect human freedom. Yes, today we need, more than ever, to examine our hearts & to draw on our great traditions of faith, to reaffirm all that makes for peace + builds up our common life.

I have here a book of sayings by the late Bishop Desmond Tutu, who was – in his time, in South Africa & worldwide – an inspirational proponent of peace. And I had the privilege, as a theological student, of working with him, in Cape Town, when he chaired the 'Truth & Reconciliation Commission', in 1998. And through no merit of my own, I'm proud that Desmond himself signed this book of his sayings, with the words, "God Bless you richly, in your commitment to the poor & for justice".

+In the book, he writes these words, "The word of God calls his people to work for justice, for only thus can there be peace."

And he goes on to outline his approach, in specifically Christian terms, "An authentic Christian spirituality is utterly subversive to any system that would treat a man or woman [or child] as anything less than a child of God. It has nothing to do with ideology & politics. Every praying Christian, every person who has an encounter with God – whatever their faith – must have a passionate concern for his or her brother or sister. To treat anyone of these as if he were less than the child of God, is to deny the validity of one's spiritual experience." For this too is at the heart of our striving for peace.

In our reading, from St John, Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the eve of what was to be his greatest sacrifice. A man, we believe, who was Son of God, and who so identified with our humanity, that he was prepared (out of love) to suffer the deepest inhumanity we could inflict, in order to show that there are no situations, no places (however ghastly) where God's presence is not to be found...

So Jesus' words here are not pious platitudes or mere sentimentality but hard-won insights – forged in the crucible of his own suffering. +What does Jesus say? 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.' 'Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends'.

Jesus knew what love meant, how difficult and agonising it can be, and he called his disciples – his followers, you & me, indeed all human beings – to tread this same costly path of love & sacrifice. A love which is prepared to struggle and to fight, and if need be, to make the ultimate sacrifice; and a love also committed to the painstaking work of reconciliation, justice and peace; of being prepared to meet the other, to listen to their stories, to overcome our prejudice, and to live together as one. 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.' Or as

Victor Hugo wrote in 'Les Miserables', reflecting on the French Revolution, 'To love another person is to see the face of God.'

For we need to remember, in all our strivings for love, that (in the end) we are all one, in our humanity, whatever our race or culture or creed; and we need each other, if we are to build (with God's help) a better world – a world where there is no more war or violence or weeping in the land. A world in which all commit to struggle for peace and dare to confront injustice & evil.

So today, as we honour the fallen and as we pray for all those cruelly affected by war, past & present: let us commit ourselves to a world without war & violence: a world where good triumphs over evil, where love overcomes fear; where peace with justice prevail; a world where all are welcome, all live together in love and harmony; a world where hard hearts and frustrated wills are transformed by the divine possibility of forgiveness & reconciliation, and a vision of true community.

And so, trusting God alone (and his great love, revealed in the face of Jesus Christ), we pray, for that day when, in Isaiah's great vision:

'[peoples] shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.'

In the name of God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.