Remembrance Sunday 2026, Rev. Canon James Shakespeare

Isaiah 2. 2-5, Romans 12. 1-2, 9-21

'He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?'

I want to hold before us this morning, as we remember, reflect and pray, this Remembrance Sunday, 2 heart-felt questions: How do we deal with the experience of loss in war? +How do we build a future that makes for peace?

Behind every statistic there is a human person, behind every politician or general's battle-plan a living soul, and in front of every ideology is a human face. +I am grateful to our local Queen Edith's Community Forum 'Capturing our History' project, not least archive material from 2018, whose research – thank you Roger –brings to life moving local war-time stories, behind our Parish Roll of Honour, which we'll hear later on.

One of highest concentrations of war dead, in WW1, was Cowper Rd, incl. Percy James Parr, of 32 Cowper Rd. Born in 1893, he was a bricklayer, and corporal in the 1st Battalion Royal Fusiliers. Returning to the army, in 1917, after several years of earlier service, he died, aged 37, at the Battle of Ypres.

Many soldiers & casualties were very young, on the threshold of life. Lance Corporal Austin, of Rathmore Road, who went to Morley School, was in the Choir here at St John's, Captain of our Church football team and worked in the Bursar's Office at Kings College. He served with the Cambridgeshire Regiment and was lost in action in 1915, aged 17. He was the youngest recipient of the Distinguished Conduct Medal in the British Army.

Wartime affected all levels of society. Stanley Burr of Cherry Hinton Road, son of a greengrocer, joined up as sergeant in the 1st Cambridgeshire Regiment, went to France in 1915 and was wounded twice. He was taken prisoner on 27th March 1918 & mentioned in despatches, aged 22.

Many survived the war but suffered long-term injuries. Alfred Marfleet, of 9 Marshall Road, of the Royal Engineers, was posted on 5th August 1914. Later he contracted trench fever and in April 1918 received a gunshot wound to his left thigh. In November that year he contracted flu and was discharged in January 1920.

Then there was pupils from the Perse, including Jocelyn Rawes, of Cherry Hinton Road, who died (with many others) at the Battle of Somme. The son of Rev Francis Rawes, Jocelyn had been a pupil & head boy at the Perse 1913-1914, winning a scholarship to St Catherine's College. Heading off to France with the Bedfordshire Regiment, he led an assault at the Somme on 1st July 1916, immediately came under gun fire & died, aged 19.

Behind every statistic – including that of the 1st World War, in which one million men lost their lives – lies a human person, a story, someone with hopes and fears and loved ones, whom we must remember, reflect upon and whose soul we must pray for. As the great war-time poet Wilfred Owen wrote, in his 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' -

What passing-bells for those who died as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The palor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Remembering, letting stories be told, rituals offered, are a vital aspect of our honouring the dead, to find some semblance of meaning, and to strive to build peace a future with justice + an end to violence, inhumanity and war.

But today, of course, our nation remembers not only the iconic and tragic significance of World War 1, but that 20th Century of conflict which 1914-18 ushered in, including WW2, and all that has followed since, into 21st Century: as we look out today on Ukraine, the Middle East, South Sudan & beyond.

How do we build a future that makes for peace, as we honour those who gave their lives? There are, of course, no easy answers, save serious prayer, honest dialogue and the courageous pursuit of justice, as well as care of God's creation. But I want, in these last moments, to dare to suggest 3 ways that we might consider, from the perspective of Christian faith:-

1. To imbibe, in our remembering, our lament, our prayer & our reflection, a prophetic imagination, inspired by the Bible, that can make all the difference to our actions and our world... Look at the O.T. (the Hebrew Bible) which, contrary to many assumptions, is full of profound metaphors of that new humanity which God longs to bring about. The prophet Isaiah, from whom our 1st reading came, was a peace-maker, speaking the very words of God:

'*Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord… that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths… He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they 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 any more.'*

We need to nurture our prophetic imagination (as Walter Bruegemann reminds us), our inner awareness of God's ways, to imagine differently, to allow God (with our help) to realise a new world; that makes for peace.

2. We need, whilst accepting that sometimes war (in extreme cases) *can* be morally justified for defence, in pursuit of peace, and for the protection of human rights – about which St. Thomas Aquinas had much to say –
to look again, at the doctrine of non-violence, as the great spiritual teachers of humanity have expounded it. As Christ himself taught us, in Matthew 5.44, *'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.'* For the outcome, contrary to our worst fears, may indeed be radically unexpected; God's peace will finally prevail.

So *'if your enemies are hungry'* writes Paul, in our 2nd reading, Romans 12 – a manifesto for living according to Christian values - *'feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil-but overcome evil with good.*

One of the most influential Christian teachers on non-violence was Walter Wink, whose book '*Engaging the powers*' suggests we need to challenge, seriously, the ingrained myth of redemptive violence, looking instead to the teachings of Jesus. As Wink argues, *"... Jesus did not advocate non-violence merely as a technique for outwitting the enemy, but as a just means of opposing the enemy in such a way as to hold open the possibility of the enemy's becoming just as well."* Last year I spoke about the witness of the late +Desmond Tutu, in South Africa, whose work illustrates this so well.

3. We need, finally, having looked at local war-time stories, from over 100 years ago, to look again at the story of Jesus Himself, in the world's healing and restoration, not just for the church but for the whole of humanity: as the one who gave himself – that all humanity might live as one – & showed us what true love looks like. For Jesus of Nazareth, betrayed, arrested, tortured + crucified, by an ancient instrument of war, carried all our inhumanities & sufferings – including the suffering of countless other young men +women, before + since – and in his crucified body made humanity as one: reconciled, within itself and with that sacred mystery we call God.

Jesus gave his life, died and rose again, that all might discover true peace, reconciliation and justice. A justice that requires everything from us, but which can only (ultimately) be achieved with God by our side… And this is why, in Gospel of John, Ch. 15, Jesus leaves his us with these simple words, in v. 12 – which speak into situations of war + peace, need + plenty, life + death, and give us all hope + resolve for a new future, in which war shall be no more – *'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.'*

Imbibing a prophetic imagination; looking again at non-violence; and looking to Jesus Christ himself + his role in the world's healing & restoration. All ways open to us, to build that new future, for which we all long. +**Amen**