

Morning Worship – Sunday 8th November
Remembrance Sunday

Sermon – Rev Paul Day

Micah 4:1-5
John 15:9-17

So here we are in a second lockdown. Once again we are living under severe restrictions about where we can go and who we can spend time with. Winter is approaching, dark evenings, long nights, cold weather. All kinds of questions swirl around our minds. What will Christmas be like? When will I see my loved ones again? When will things be normal again?

It's easy to get dragged down into despair and sadness; easy to let the isolation and uncertainty overwhelm us; easy to lose hope.

But our faith is a faith based on hope. Not a wishful thinking, "hope for the best" kind of hope; but a sure and certain hope and trust that God loves us and will bring good from all this mess, all this suffering if you like. In his letter to the Romans Paul writes that he rejoices in suffering because ..

suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us

I'm not sure I'll ever be in a place to rejoice in suffering, but what Paul says is right. Going through hard times – suffering even - does produce endurance, character and hope. This is all part of God bringing good out of bad. It happens all the time - we just need to be aware and keep our eyes open to see God at work. Redemption is the Christian word we often use for it. Redeeming bad situations as he brings good out of them. Demonstrated supremely in the resurrection of Jesus. The suffering and pain and evil and injustice of the cross could not hold him. His resurrection shows that there is hope. That even in the darkest situations the light of God's presence shines through. That good ultimately triumphs over evil.

This is the kind of hope that is expressed in the reading from Micah. A hope that things won't always be as they are now. In Micah's case, this hope is that one day the weapons of war will be turned into tools of peace; that one day people will be able to live in harmony and understanding; that one day people can live without being dragged down by fear or despair. This is Micah's hope – his vision. And he knew that it was God who could make this hope become a reality.

And today of course is not a bad day to be thinking of such things. Remembrance Sunday. A day when we look back and remember those who have died in war. We bring to mind some of the darkest depths to which humanity has sunk. The blitz bombing of cities, the dropping of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the concentration camps and gas chambers, the horrors of the world war one trenches, the turning of neighbour against neighbour in the Rwandan genocide, innocent civilians getting caught in the cross fire of conflicts in Sarajevo, Lebanon, Palestine and elsewhere. The list could go on and on.

But remembering these dark times and marking the passing of those who have died in war and because of war, though important, is not enough on which to build a new world. It's not enough to enable good to come out of evil; it's not enough to realise a hope for the future. We need to be prepared to change and be changed so that the future is not the same as the past. And that's why, for me, Remembrance always has a certain sadness. And that's not just a sadness over the events we are recalling, but a deeper sadness that it appears to be so hard to learn from them. That every year there seems to be more war, more hatred, more suffering, more oppression, more injustice, more people fleeing from danger and persecution at home and looking for safe haven.

So where does this leave us as people who believe in hope and redemption? Will the world ever get better? Can the world ever get better? The clue I think lies in what Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God – which is evident, you recall, whenever and wherever the rule and authority of God is recognised.

Last week we were thinking about Jesus' teaching being a kind of manifesto about what life in the Kingdom of God might be like. And we saw that Kingdom lives could be lived in the here and now by people like you and me. In many ways the things that mark life in the Kingdom are like the signs of hope that Micah expresses. Lives lived in response to the love of God demonstrating peace, righteousness, mercy, contentment, freedom from fear and oppression, and an overarching recognition of the rule and authority of God. We need to note, of course, that the condition for the realisation of Micah's vision was that people should *go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths* in other words, accept the rule and authority of God.

In our gospel reading today we see that Jesus once more focuses on love. Love one another as I have loved you. In response to the love of God, we are to love each other. Everyone. Not just those like us or close to us but to all. Love like this, says Jesus, and you will bear fruit. Paul in his letter to the Galatians describes such fruit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. In other words, if you love one another as I have loved you, you will help

make this hope and vision a reality, you will help usher in the Kingdom of God. You will be part of what God wants to do – bringing his goodness from the mess of the world.

So where do these thoughts about suffering, remembering, and looking forward with hope bring us?

First a recognition that God's desire is always to bring good out of evil. Be it a lockdown due to Covid or the horrors of war, God wants to redeem situations and make hope a reality. His desire is that suffering does not have the last word, but that love triumphs over it.

Second an appreciation that in our own strength we can achieve little. We are always hampered by what we might call 'sin' or as I have heard sin defined "the human propensity to mess things up". Whatever we try, however good the motives, it will always go wrong in some way. Redemption lies beyond merely human endeavour.

And finally, the understanding that really can bring hope to the situations we find ourselves in. When we accept God's love – when we recognise his rule and authority – we can begin to live in ways that reflect his love and in small ways maybe begin to change the world.

We thought last week about how it's possible to be part of the answer to the prayer "your kingdom come, your will be done". Through the Covid lockdown we can become answers to prayers as we care for and support and encourage each other. It doesn't have to be anything difficult. A cheery phone call, an offer to help with the shopping or walk the dog. Something small that points to something larger. And maybe by bringing hope to someone else, we also encourage that small candle flame of hope within us.

And as we look back on this Remembrance Sunday we can become answers to prayers as we seek to show God's love to all and look for ways of peace and reconciliation rather than conflict and confrontation that will bring change for the better. We can't solve the world's problems, but in our dealings with neighbours and friends and family we can look for common ground rather than being content with being far apart.