

Remembrance Sunday

Amos 5:18-24

1 Thessalonians 4:13-end

Matthew 25:1-13

Later this morning hundreds of people from Shirley – including many of us - will gather along the Stratford Road and in the churchyard. And as we gather, we will focus our thoughts on the men and women who have given up their lives in wartime – those whose names are inscribed on the war memorial in the churchyard; those from our own families whose stories we have been told; those who have died in other conflicts across the world; those who have been caught up in the horrors of war from “our side” and those from “the other side”. We will remember their lives and their deaths. Perhaps we will shed tears.

But Remembrance Sunday cannot just be about remembering. For their deaths to mean anything there needs to be hope for the future – for a different future. Hope of a better world; a world of justice and peace. And so later this morning in that service we will also pledge ourselves once more to work for “the relief of the needy and for the peace and welfare of the nations”. And as an inspiration we will read aloud the ancient words from the prophet Isaiah, words which were repeated by the prophet Micah, *they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

But how can those words become more than mere words of good intention? How can they become a reality? Is a world without war and conflict anything more than an unrealisable dream?

Its very easy to think the problem is too big for ordinary people like us. What can I do – what can we do – to stop the war in Ukraine, or the conflict in Israel and Gaza or any manner of conflicts across the world. It must be down to Governments, perhaps to the United Nations, those with power and influence. Its surely about changes on a global scale, changes that might begin to see that negotiation and agreeing to differ is a better way forward than confrontation and conflict.

But it is important too to look at whether what we as individuals do can make any difference.

In the gospels we read that Jesus taught a completely different way of looking at life and living life than was the norm then and is the norm now. Remember these words from the sermon on the mount

You have heard that it was said do not murder, but I say If you are angry, or if you insult your brother or sister you have sinned

You have heard that it was said do not commit adultery but I say If you look at a woman lustfully you have sinned

Turn the other cheek, give to those who beg from you

Love your enemy, pray for those who hate you

These are radical words. If everyone took them to heart the world would certainly change. They are words that say its not just about what we do; its about what we think, how we think, the very people we are in our hearts.

But Jesus was also realistic to know that it wouldn't happen. He knew that even those who believed in him would find it nigh on impossible to stick to his teaching. (something we no doubt know from our own experiences)

He was effectively saying. Yes, what I am showing you is the ideal, this is what we should work towards and hope for. And even the fact that we know it won't happen shouldn't stop us doing all we can to bring to about. Jesus talked about there being glimpses of the Kingdom of God in those times and places where people did respond to his teaching and example of self giving love. But he was clear that the fullness of the kingdom was something that would never be fully realised in this world. However, he never allowed that to be a reason for us not doing what we can do to work towards its establishment.

So what can we do?

I think it begins a little further back than our actions. It begins with the way we think. Our attitudes. Our assumptions. Our prejudices if you like.

When we look at Hamas and their attack a month or so back on Jews just trying to live in peace and quiet, what do we think? What would Jesus think?

When we hear the leaders of the nation of Israel quoting the Old Testament to back up their actions in attacking Gaza where thousands of Palestinians are seeking to live their lives in peace and quiet, what do we think? What would Jesus think?

And when we hear a cabinet minister saying that a march asking for peace is disrespectful because it is on Armistice Day – a day when we celebrate peace – what do we think? What would Jesus think?

Perhaps we need to take a step back, consider what we are hearing and being told – not just accepting it blindly. Perhaps instead of trying to justify things by claiming God is on one side or the other side we need to ask a much bigger question. Are we on God's side?

I think God makes it quite clear in scripture – both in the Old Testament and in the New through the teaching of Jesus - where he is on these issues. We've already heard that prophecy in Isaiah of turning swords into plowshares. Today we read from Amos "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."

We know the teaching of Jesus as in the sermon on the mount and perhaps best summarised as love your neighbour as yourself.

God's side is about showing love to people. About justice and peace. About living in harmony. About people being connected rather than divided.

Perhaps the issue we would do well to tackle is our tendency to label people, to define them in some way. Because its that kind of labelling that can easily lead to hate and mistrust. This can be seen through history, The Genocide of Jews in WW2; the Genocide in Rwanda; the wars in the Balkans, the attitudes in Russia and Ukraine; the current conflict in Israel and Gaza. Once we label someone as different to us, it very easy to stop thinking of them as a person. They cease to be an individual loved and valued by God.

The same applies to immigrants, refugees, and so on. I have heard of people talking of their fear of immigrants moving into a neighbourhood, but once they get to know their Asian next door neighbour they soon realise there is more that unites than divides. Once we get to know people as individuals our whole perception changes.

So perhaps our calling is in the smaller things we do and in the attitudes that lead to them. The way we look at people; the acts of love we show; the kind words; the seeking of peaceful solutions; the forgiveness and reconciliation that we can bring about in our personal relationships. The living the way Jesus showed us. I have heard one of the beatitude paraphrased as *blessed are those who think more of their responsibilities than their rights*. As a human being made in God's image I have a responsibility to those around me – those like me and those not like me.

We can become disheartened by the sheer magnitude of the issues facing us, so much so that we lose all hope. But we can make small differences; As well as our acts of love we can make other contributions to the solution rather than simply being part of the problem. We can make representations to those with power – writing to an MP, becoming part of a campaigning group. We can find hope in the small things that are possible rather than being discouraged by the big things that are way out of our control.

So there is an opportunity today to look back, but also to look forward in hope. To see that hope is ordinary people like you and me being transformed into the people Jesus wants us to be, to live as he taught us and showed us.

It's a time to ask forgiveness for the ways we have messed things up in the past and to seek God's help and inspiration as we seek to move forward.

It's a time to look to the possible and not be put off by the impossible.