

Sunday 12th November

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: 132 "O God, our help in ages past"
719 "We pray for peace"
"This is my song, O God of all the nations"
645 "Will your anchor hold in the storms of life"

READINGS: Micah 4:1-5
Ephesians 6:101-8, 23-24

"BUT NOT THE EASY PEACE"

One hundred years ago only limited news was filtering out from the Western Front, the Allied and German forces were engaged in a bloody war of attrition in the stinking Flanders mud. Thousands upon thousands of British, French and German troops together with colonial and dominion forces died or were severely injured in the battle of Passchendaele which ended on the 6th November 1917.

The much criticised General Sir Douglas Haig was determined to battle on, achieving limited success at huge cost until, at the beginning of November, Canadian troops arrived and helped to capture the ridge of Passchendaele, after which the battle came to be named. The human cost for a few miles of territory was truly awful.

In 2015a group from this church, together with our ecumenical colleagues from our local churches travelled to the battlefields of Belgium. We went to the Menin Gate in Ypres for the ceremony of the Last Post and saw the lists of thousands of names carved into those walls. We went to the Commonwealth War Graves cemeteries –the small ones and the huge ones. At Tyne Cot, as many of you know, the serried lines of graves stretch off into the distance – at one and the same time impressive yet terrible – the sheer loss of young life commemorated there leaves one speechless.

In August 1914 young men from Britain and other nations had signed up and gone off to war as an adventure, fully expecting to be home for Christmas. There was bravado in the air – it would be all good fun, the Germans would be out in their place and life would return to normal. O, what folly!

This was supposed to be the war that would end all wars, but, in the words of the historian, Margaret MacMillan, it turned out to be the war that ended peace. We know, only too well, that the punitive conditions imposed on the defeated Germans contributed to the outbreak of World War Two, giving Hitler the raw material with which to rally the dispirited and demoralised German people.

We also know that the unresolved issues from both World wars are still a cause of conflict in our own days – Israel/Palestine and the position of the Kurds to name just

two. We would like to think that peace is the norm in our world and conflict an aberration whether on the level of individuals or on the level of nation states.

We would like those words from Micah to be true for us:

“For out of Zion shall go forth instruction
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
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 anymore.”

Please, Lord, let peace come. Let peace come. But before we get too carried away we need to ask ourselves what sort of peace we want.

We have just sung Alan Gaunt’s challenging hymn. This hymn addresses the question of what we mean by peace. The hymn holds up for dismissal the loose way in which we often speak of peace, our failure to interrogate the concept, our willingness to wrong situations fester rather than challenge the status quo.

Alan Gaunt identifies three loose ways of speaking of peace. Firstly he speaks of the easy peace – one that avoids hard questions – built on complacency not on the justice and truth which God requires.

At the personal level one can see this in the way that domestic abuse and violence has been, and in some places, still is considered. Women, (for it is predominantly women) are urged to be long-suffering and to be forgiving but that is not peace, which is not proper life. Such attitudes need to be challenged. Challenge will be confrontational – it will not be easy but if there is no challenge thousands even millions of women will remain trapped in stifling and dangerous relationships. We need, for example, to learn from Asian women what they think about so-called ‘honour killings.’

On the international level Burma/Myanmar is a long way away from us. The violent treatment meted out to the Rohingya Muslims in that country does not affect us directly. We can turn our faces away. But if we do so, let us not delude ourselves that our neglect of our fellow human beings diminishes our own humanity and helps to create a culture of impunity where such things are more and more likely to happen.

Secondly Alan Gaunt speaks about the cruel peace that ignores the suffering of people. Whatever one’s political affiliation, I think we can agree that the gap between the ‘have’s’ and the ‘have-not’s’ in our own country has grown to unacceptable levels.

Such gaps between the rich and poor provide fertile ground for the disaffected and lead our communities to break down. What happened at Grenfell Tower was just the most recent and the most iconic illustration of how we live in a society where gross inequality is not only tolerated but even promoted by the policies of some in authority.

On the international level we are only too aware of the sad plight of refugees forced to flee from conflict in Syria, Afghanistan or Somalia. In the past we could delude ourselves that these problems were far away but that is no longer the case. Each and every day people flee from conflict, intimidation, famine and drought and they seek to come to Europe – thousands upon thousands on a daily basis. As never before we live in a global village where events in one place ripple their effects around the world.

Thirdly, Alan Gaunt speaks of the evil peace, maintained through unjust laws which deny people their basic rights. There are regimes all around the world who treat their own people very badly. After Iraq, we and the nations of the 'democratic west' have been very reluctant to get involved in the affairs of other nations. This is a real dilemma for in the past our intervention has often been for mixed motives and we have failed to follow through on the reason for our intervention. But sometimes such is the cruelty of a leadership towards its people that more than words are called for.

We would do well to remember how Hitler's regime developed over the years. Let us listen to the words of a German Lutheran pastor, Martin Niemöller, who spent years in a concentration camp for eventually speaking out.

First they came for the Socialists and I did not speak
out because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists and I was not a
Trade unionist, so I did not speak out.
Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out
Because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.

We do not live in the 1930s and God forbid those days should ever return. But we do live in a period when things which we thought could never happen – are happening. The European Union – a constructive, if at times flawed, response to bringing an end to conflict in Europe is under pressure – and not just from Brexit but from resurgent nationalism in many European nations. What will happen in Spain as it seeks to keep Catalonia as part of the country?

The stand-off between North Korea and the US, Japan and China has already lead to provocative launching of missiles and war games. It only needs one wrong move for this situation to escalate out of hand quickly. We should remember that World War One was triggered by an almost random event in another part of Europe – the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo.

As Christians and as citizens of the world we would wish to believe that peace is the norm and war an aberration but sadly history does not bear this out. Rather we need to face the reality that conflict and war have been deeply woven into the fabric of human history from the beginning of time. Yes, we have developed mechanisms to contain conflict and to keep warring parties apart – UN Peacekeepers and NATO forces but they only work when all the protagonists can agree.

And we should never underestimate the part played by individuals in tipping a nation closer to war or in preventing that from happening. Conflicts break out as a result of thousands of human judgements or misjudgements – ours as well as those of political leaders.

So, as our passage from Ephesians reminds us we need to be strong in the Lord – for our struggle is not only against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against authorities, against the spiritual forces of evil.

As we remember today those who served as soldiers, sailors and airmen and those conscientious objectors who served as ambulance drivers and stretcher bearers, we should accept our own responsibility in creating peace or in failing to do so. We should each accept our responsibility as peacemakers and peacekeepers in our families, in our workplaces, in our church and in all the varied interactions we have with other people.

Jesus came to bring peace – real peace enriching all humanity. Jesus came to bring peace but not a peace that allows injustice to flourish unchecked and so we pray in the words of Alan Gaunt

“God give us peace
If you withdraw your love
There is no peace for us
Nor any hope of it.
With you to lead us on
Through death or tumult, peace will come.” Amen