

Hymns: **106** **God whose almighty word**

132 O God our help in ages past

This is my song (Lloyd Stone: tune, Finlandia)

This is my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is,
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine.
But other hearts in other lands are beating,
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
And sunlight beams on clover leaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight too, and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
O hear my song, thou God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.

459 **Captain of Israel's Hope and Guide**

Readings: **Romans 8.31-35,37-39**
 John 15.9-17

"Fruit that will last"

Prayer – Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the word of my lips, and the mediation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. AMEN.

My first station as a Methodist minister was to Kettering and Corby in Northamptonshire, an area that during the Great War and after made soldiers' boots - by their hundreds of thousands. By their millions. Then later, Corby steel built a fleet, rebuilt the bombed cities of this country, scarred by the second world war.

Today the factories are gone – the steel, the shoe manufacture - bar a very few boutique brands the factories have been knocked down or stand empty – no more boots. I thought about this, hearing about Westminster Council's memorial this week – a massive video installation of men marching – the sound of boots marching across the large screen in Piccadilly circus. It would take nearly 11 days for the Commonwealth dead to walk past, they said.

As Christian people we speak of Remembrance every week, every time we gather at the Lord's table. And Jesus, when he commands us to remember, means something more

meaty than a mere memorial. This is not just looking at holiday snaps – to remember in Christian tradition is to make real, present – now – the body, the blood, the boots, the mud.

Soon after I had come to Kettering and Corby, fresh from theological college to serve the Methodist churches, I went to visit a church member, a man who had lived in Kettering many years, but began his life in the Punjab, before partition.

He told me about serving in the British Indian army in the second world war- though he had very little English, he could remember and repeat the commands of his English RSM, the Drill Sergeant who put them through their paces in perfect clipped and accented tones of the kind we rarely hear nowadays.

He remembered with humour how the men would jump at their Sergeant's voice, the practiced discipline of comradeship that would protect them, and did, when the fight came. He told me less about coming out of the Army and of coming to Britain: I don't know, but I like to think he walked in boots made in Kettering, the town that would become his final home, even boots made by Methodist hands.

Because it was these hands that would later share bread, welcome his wife, himself as sister and brother in the church, when they were almost the first from 'from the empire' to settle in that town.

It is men such as these, men and women from Great Britain and the Commonwealth, people from around the world whom we remember today: ordinary men and women who served in the forces of this country and her allies in the Great War and the Second World War, and the conflicts since. 100 years today since the Armistice was signed.

What I knew of war as a young person was different. It was images of Vietnam: returning soldiers who were not greeted with parades. Far from images of heroic sacrifice among comrades in arms, we among my generation in the United States carried the mental picture of a child running from her village, covered in burning napalm, arms outstretched.

This was strange contrast to the suburban life I knew, with its tree-lined streets and safe front porches. It was a life where I took peace for granted, where every Sunday in church we prayed for places far away where something called war happened to other people. There are some among us here who have known war. As soldiers, or as civilians. What images of war do you bring to God, today?

But none of us is removed from the work of remembrance today. We each of us, the elderly Kettering soldier from the Punjab and myself, no less each of you here, are chosen by God, involved in God's great purpose of peace, of salvation for our world.

And as we remember the sacrifice of those who did not return from war, as those who still serve, we mourn the tragedy of their loss and remember the bereaved, as the tragedy of civilians killed and wounded. We commit ourselves to work for peace in our time, and we give thanks for peace. For the illusive safety of front porches and unlocked doors, windows left open in school buildings, places of worship, homes. I want to live in a country so free, so peaceful that any synagogue, every Mosque can worship with its doors unlocked. Would we ever think that the simple thing of worshipping here at Wesley's Chapel, with the doors unlocked, might be a chosen statement of commitment to being vulnerable for the work of peace?

And if the doors of our church, then so much more the doors of our heart – unlocked for the vulnerable work of making peace.

This peace is a fragile peace, it is not preserved by accident in any land, and is so easily torn away in any land.

I look at the news this week, considering the monumental tragedy of the Great War, and our global politics, and economics – WB Yeats’ poem, *The Second Coming*, written just after the end of the Great War feels like it could describe today:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity....

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches to
wards Bethlehem to be born?*

But Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to bear fruit, fruit that will last.” And Paul reminds us that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God. And I believe these words so I am here you and we are here together.

Let us remember that in those phrases from the Gospel according to St. John, Jesus was speaking to his disciples on the night before he died. These are not words spoken at a summer picnic, but on the last night of his life. They are words spoken when those in power get it by setting group against group, by whipping up hatred and fear of the other, by engaging our fears to keep us compliant. Jesus spoke these words as someone who knew that fear felt by a mob is a commodity, today a commodity that can be bought and sold for power and profit on an international stage. These were words spoken for a day like today.

Jesus reminded his disciples that like it or not, they were chosen: He had involved them in a purpose far greater than the needs of their own families, parents, their sweethearts and their work. ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you.’

These words should jar us, as we gather to remember this hundred years since Armistice, the deaths of the many in this nation and the Commonwealth's causes.

Because mostly we are remembering today ordinary men and women who had their good days and bad, who saved their money, or spent it; people who loved and hoped and worked and laughed. As we remember them today, they are not just fading names on a memorial plaque, but all too fragile flesh and blood.

Ours is not a present that likes to talk about duty or sacrifice; ours is not a present that likes to remember that there are some times that demand of us more than 'thoughts and prayers' to confront evil, if we are to make peace. Jesus knew it when he spoke of his own death: 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friends.'

Be wary - the great and cynical temptation is to say that, in our sophisticated world of collateral damage, with complex causes of war, where evil is rife and the cause of good is sometimes indistinct, these deaths have lost what meaning they had. However history may judge the purposes of wars long over – and history is right to judge - Friends, the cause God, in which Jesus involves us, has not lost meaning.

The death of even one, the life of one, has not lost meaning. Amidst the chaos of history – the purpose of God in bringing the kingdom stands as true, and as demanding, and ever so fragile as it ever was.

The frustration for me, and for many, is that a bit more paying the cost in peacetime might prevent our getting to the choice of paying the cost in war. And for all any of us has ambiguity at the nationalistic overtones that creep into the best of our intentions in keeping these Remembrance traditions – all that hubbub obscures a deeper, less comfortable question – what are we willing to sacrifice for peace?

God intends us to remember our dead, and respect their deaths, by sacrifice for and in peace. Mobilise for unity, sacrifice for welcome. For economic development all over the globe, for education everywhere, for little girls and boys in the remotest village and the largest city factories—wherever our boots are made. The descent to war may seem chaotic, but one thing our history has shown – poverty leads to violence. Lands starved of law, and of bread, lay up a bitter vintage of division.

Do we think it could not happen again, this 'Great War?' Dare we think that the great empires of democracy that have been a part of our lives for this hundred years, and a little longer, are made of people any more naturally able to love each other than the great empires that have passed into dust, via the blade of the sword, and the bullet of the machine gun?

Do not take the fruit of peace for granted, please friends. And here we find our purpose, we remember to whom we belong. Speaking of Colin Morris, once Superintendent minister here, African Statesman and first president of Zambia Kenneth Kaunda said, because of his work and the presence of the church, 'our independence did not come through the barrel of a gun.'

And Methodists in Kettering, where I was that young minister, welcomed that veteran of the Indian Army whom I visited as an old man – and his family from the Punjab long before it was fashionable to do so. Today the church in Kettering has many nations among its members.

Let us not take the fruit of peace for granted – this is the best legacy of remembrance we can make. Global and local, using every means we have.

And when the evil day of decision comes, to fight or not to fight - we pray God save us from that choice, and save those caught in war today who have no luxury of choice, the men and women, the children of Yemen, of Syria, of the many lands in which conflict rages.

We come together remembering the sacrifices of the past, holding before God the memory of our fallen, because evil is still loose in our world. With the confidence of faith in the love of God for this broken world, we are chosen to confront it.

Evil will demand more from us than kind words, as it demanded more from those we remember. "I am giving you these commands," said Jesus, "so that you may love one another."

Obligation, duty, sacrifice: unfashionable words in our contemporary society, in our buying and selling, in our career choices and our politics. Let us dignify the memory of our fallen men and women by making these old fashioned notions still matter: in the smallest choices of our lives, in our families, across our kitchen tables, as they do in this church: as in the greatest choices our country faces, and our hope for the world. May God bless the memory of those who have died in the name of that hope.

And to the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory, now and forever,
AMEN.