

10<sup>th</sup> November 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

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Hymns:     83     Praise, my soul, the King of heaven  
              132     O God, our help in ages past  
              18     Be still and know that I am God  
              645     Will your anchor hold in the storms of life  
                      Hope for the world's despair (Hymn of Peace)  
                                  by Ally Barrett

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Readings:  Micah 4:1-5  
              Psalm 46  
              John 15:9-17

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### **“Learning War”**

*Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

*Silence*

Learning War

‘In the days to come,’ says the prophet Micah, God ‘...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;’  
Instead of learning war, the prophet says, ‘they shall all sit under their own vines and fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.’

In the days to come they shall learn war no more. Shall not study it. In the days to come.

I sit with the prophet’s words – no more shall they study war – and I am faced with the reality that we are not yet in the days to come. ‘The latter days,’ of the old translations. Whatever today is, it is not a day when humanity has turned swords to ploughshares.

Conspicuously we still turn to warfare, to violence to settle conflicts. And I speak not just of the hot conflicts that engage our military services – deployed today in far-flung parts of the world. But also of the slow moving violence of poverty, of economic systems that lead to anything but ‘every woman, every man beneath her own, his own vine and fig tree,’ a vision which is nothing if not a statement of economic justice.

Friends, Remembrance Sunday is a day to remember the ending of war, to pray our thanksgiving and remember the cost of war. Last year we marked the centenary of

the end of the Great war, the 1914-18 war – at 11 in the morning on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month.

Remembrance Sunday is meant as a day of reckoning, a day for repentance, and thanksgiving both. A day when we learn from war. Learn for peace. Learn war for the day to come, that day which is not here yet, when every person will sit in economic and civil security 'beneath their own vine and fig tree' and fear no one. One truth we know from history is that where people starve, there will come war.

And if we know anything, we who follow Christ, it is that we are to live as if in the already come kingdom. In the latter days, today. And yet.

I worry that if we do not study war, if we do not learn its ways and wiles, its chaos and its rhetoric, its skills and costs and technology and culture, we will repeat it. Not to study war, seems to me a betrayal a forgetfulness of the sacrifices made by so many.

Primo Levi was a childhood survivor of the concentration camp Auschwitz, later an internationally acclaimed scientist and author. Of the war machine of his time, its nationalism and its killing zeal he said: 'If to understand is impossible, to know is necessary, because what has happened can return, the consciences can be once again seduced and obscured – also ours.'

So knowing all we do, of the reality of war in which causes are sometimes indistinct, and clarity of purpose can be rare, how are we to learn war, as latter day people? People living in the already our lives a testimony to the final purpose of God, the final promise, which is peace.

A danger for me is that on days like today we fall either into a sentimentality in speaking of peace, that fails adequately to understand the causes of conflict and thus does not stand strongly enough, does not engage to block its way. And fails to acknowledge our part in the conditions that bring conflict.

Or into a despair – war is inevitable, more young lives, more refugees, more upheaval and simply thank God for the generations in which it is not on our doorstep. Or atleast, not on my doorstep.

I quote Reinhold Neibuhr, writing in 1945 in his book Children of light, children of darkness – There must in Christian life, he wrote, be '...unwillingness to stop short of the whole human community in expressing our sense of moral responsibility for the life and welfare of others.'

Sentimentality, despair – neither honour our dead. Neither honours God. Neither makes peace.

So as Jesus' followers, and people fully aware of the sin and complexity of armed conflict – what will we study, how and when? How will we do the work that lives in the latter days, the days of Isaiah and of Micah?

What will we study. First, to know and learn history. Not just of the great conflicts that are taught in GCSE Curriculum, but of the conflicts that led to the Biafran war, the civil war in Sierra Leone, the civil war and reprisals in England – and in my own

country the United States. And when I say know and learn history, I mean to look for the missed chances, to keep reading the present times, that our conscience does not become 'seduced and obscured?' And I include in this that we study the voices of our prophets in scripture – Micah and Isaiah and Joel, Amos – and listen to the voice of Jesus who teaches us to live as people of the latter days, people of the promise of peace. Let these be the lens through which we make choices. How to vote, what to buy, how to pray.

And we must study not only history, but secondly economics – must stay engaged and lift our attention away beyond our own vine, our own fig tree. Not that we become afraid, but to make common cause with those who are. We who follow the crucified Christ. There are days when evil has demanded more, will demand more than wringing hands and petitions. Pray God these days do not come to be our days.

How will we study war? With every means possible. If you have been to the gallery that houses the permanent African collections, downstairs and around a corner in the British museum, you will see an extraordinary sculpture called the 'throne of weapons.'

This was made by the artist Kester in 2001 from decommissioned firearms, as part of 'Transforming Arms into Tools', a project in Mozambique founded by Bishop Dinis Sengulane in 1995 that has been instrumental in the voluntary surrender of more than 600,000 weapons, in exchange for tools of production. The Throne was purchased by the British Museum in 2002 and displayed in the Sainsbury African Galleries alongside more traditional stools and chairs that are symbols in many African societies both of authority and the willingness to sit and listen, an essential pre-requisite for mutual understanding.

But what I think of, when I see it, is how much hard physical labour it took to beat that global collection of guns that had somehow landed in Mozambique – how much hard physical labour to weld, to beat them into a throne. And the reactions it had provoked – not all easy. Is this a right thing to have in a gallery of African art and culture?

What you might not know, is that this throne was commissioned and its purchase negotiated by a man who goes to a Methodist Church, in West London. When any of us asks, how can we be a part of the latter days' promise – how can we study war, here is a role model.

What, how, when will we learn war?

This last week I have spent on retreat, in Assisi in Italy where St Francis lived and died, in 1205. His was a ministry of radical poverty. Of embracing sacrifice and simplicity of life – a single tunic, no security of food or shelter, a radical dependence on Christ. And whatever else, Francis was a peace maker. He taught the radical welcome of all people, as bearing the image of God. In his day, he rode out to try to make peace with the Sultan of Babylon, to end the crusades. He sought peace between his home town of Assisi, and its historical rival, Perugia. Francis was hardly perfect. But his way of working left behind communities that valued life. That expected and looked for sacrifice to protect it. Not always, not without failings, and sin.

But when the fascists ruled Italy, and in the latter days of the Nazi occupation in 1943 and 44, Assisi sheltered over 300 Jewish refugees in secret. Hidden in homes and churches and convents. The parish priest and local printer, along with a woman who worked as an administrator in the town offices, made fake documents so refugees could claim food rations. The Bishop of Assisi hid scrolls of the Torah in the walls of his own palace, plastering them in with his own hands to avoid putting any workman at risk. Surviving arrest, the priest returned and served in Assisi until his death in 2007 at the age of 94.

And the German medical doctor who had the command of the city stood at its gates after Italy signed the Armistice, and protected the city night after night against retreating troops, with a pistol in his hand. He may or may not have known of the hidden Jews, but he did what he could in the midst of chaos and evil.

How, when, where do we learn war? In all ways, at all times. And giving way neither to sentimentality, nor to despair.

I've told these stories, not to make us think of superheroes or feats we can only imagine. But to remind us that it is ordinary people who make peace. Who give thanks. Who fight wars, and who stop them.

The kind of people whom Jesus called friends. Of whom he said, you have no greater gift than this, to lay down your life for your friends. This was not abstract theology from Jesus.

We stand today as ordinary people. Beloved of God, quite different in our gifts and work and history. But as friends of Jesus, as ones who are committed to the work of remembrance. Which is to testify that death is not the end, that peace is our promise.

Thanksgiving for those who have given life and limb in times of war, attention to our servicemen and women today – and to civilians of all kinds caught in violence. Jesus words offer us a different way which is neither sentimental calls for peace, nor despairing acceptance of war: these are the latter days, the days to come. We can live as if the latter days are today.

And as we vote, as we spend, as we work, as we welcome, my prayer is God do not put us to the test. Save us today from temptation, do not bring the choices back to our doorsteps, to our vines and fig trees.

And, as those choices come, and they are come in Syria, in Iraq in Afghanistan, in Ukraine, in the Niger Delta – in any place pregnant for war – I pray for the grace to make good ones. TO learn enough of war to make peace. To honour our dead, to honour our neighbour, to honour God.

That all may live in peace, and unafraid.