

Remembrance Sunday 2023

St Brandon's

Amos 5: 18-24; Matthew 25: 1-11

12 November 2023

Remembrance Sunday is, of course, a time when we as a nation and we as church honour those who have died in war, particularly those from the two world wars of the last century. For the past century and more, on the anniversary of the guns falling silent over the devastated world in 1918, we have ceremonially remembered those who fell.

But in church, as well as remembering and honouring those who have died in the past, we also pray for peace in the present, as we will do in a few minutes. So this year, as last, we pray for peace in Ukraine; and this year, unlike last, we pray for peace between Israel and Palestine.

In 1916, German papers reported that, as Kaiser Wilhelm and his staff came to a hillock covered with scores of young bodies, he halted, and cried, "*Ich habe das nicht gewollt*" — "I did not wish that." Who can know now whether that was true? But give remorse the benefit of the doubt: sometimes the pain, the waste of it all *is* overwhelming. The obscenity of total war, not just between armies but, deliberately, on civilians, with their crying babies and disabled elderly, has the evil momentum of a juggernaut, which nobody, nothing, except perhaps bankrupt exhaustion, seems to be able to stop.

And so in these days, when the news is so unremittingly awful, and when there is, understandably, so much raw anger on the airwaves, we might perhaps be haunted by a question that Shakespeare poses in Sonnet 65: "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, Whose action is no stronger than a flower?" Shakespeare was actually raging against the passing and effects of time, but we can, I think, apply this just as much to the rage of war.

In the first images that came after the attacks in Israel, it was clear that neither beauty nor innocence could hold a plea with such rage, but were slaughtered without mercy; and now—it seems, inevitably—we see the images of equally innocent victims, their pleas also unheard, suffering in Gaza.

How, then, are we who are affected, some directly, many of us more indirectly, respond to the continuing rage of war in our day?

One possible response is just to give up on it all. Any action we could possibly take is, after all, "no stronger than a flower". We cannot make any difference against these raging geopolitical forces, so why bother to try? And nor does God seem to be making any difference, does not seem to be answering prayer, does not seem to come. So, if He isn't able or willing to halt the evil momentum of war, what hope have we?

It is at least arguable that this was the case with the five foolish bridesmaids in our Gospel reading. They were certainly not prepared for a long wait. If the bridegroom, who is of course Christ, does not get here on time, then that's not their problem. They, in effect, gave up on the bridegroom ever coming, gave up on hope. So too, we might give up on God ever

coming; we might not be prepared for a long wait, we in effect give up on hope, and if so we would have no good reason to do anything.

An alternative response is just to assume that all will be well in the end, that God is on 'our' side and will sort it all out, so that we're all right and don't *need* to do anything. That, it seems, was the position of the people of Israel in our reading from Amos. They were looking forward to the 'Day of the Lord' because they believed that then YHWH (God) would destroy their enemies, and give victory to His chosen people. So, they didn't *need* to do anything, because God would do everything. They didn't give up on hope but, as we see from Amos's response, it was a misplaced hope that assumed that everything was well with them when it clearly wasn't.

We too, then, might either feel we have no good reason to do anything, particularly if God doesn't seem to be doing anything. We, in effect, give up on hope. Or alternatively, we might feel that we don't need to do anything, because God will sort it all out in the end. This retains hope, but it might well be a misplaced hope on our part.

But neither are, of course, satisfactory responses. How then, might we respond more truly? First, we do need to retain hope. The foolish bridesmaids may have given up on the bridegroom coming at all, but come he does, albeit not until midnight. And the wedding banquet, the great consummation of all things in and with God, does take place.

Similarly, the Day of the Lord will come even if we are not told when, and even if it is to be feared for the judgement that will take place. But we can rightly reckon that justice will then roll down like waters, and righteousness (things being returned to how they should always have been) will come like an ever-flowing stream.

We must not give up on hope, we must not give up on God, even if the waiting is so painful.

And therefore we have every good reason to do something. We might well say with Shakespeare, "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, Whose action is no stronger than a flower?" But we have all seen the green shoots that seem miraculously to grow up through cracks in the concrete, or how rewilding can transform a barren landscape in no time at all.

What might that mean for us at this distance from the wars taking place today? Well firstly to pray. To pray for the peacemakers; to pray for those who mourn; to pray for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for things to be returned to how they should always have been, for justice to be done. To pray again and again, and to demand from God, that the blessings of which Christ spoke in the Beatitudes would come true in our day.

And then to work for peace, to be with those who mourn—even at a distance, to side with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and to do justice in our own lives.

Then might beauty hold a plea. Then might we find that we are working alongside the God who does and will come.

Amen