Remembrance Sunday

Remembrance Sunday 2017

Remembrance Sunday – 12 November 2017

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Dr Marjory Maclean, Minister of Abernyte with Inchture Parish Church, for her thoughts on the Remembrance Sunday.

Notes on the Lectionary readings are provided by Phill Mellstrom, Church of Scotland Mission Development Worker.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

Introduction

This is the Sunday of the year that is often the most tricky and sensitive for the preacher. It is the Sunday when it seems most inevitable that you will not succeed in ‘pleasing all of the people...’ no matter what you do. That is because Christian attitudes to war and the military can cause division amongst people who otherwise agree, as people worry about what is and is not being recognised or remembered or celebrated.

Notes on the choice of readings

The lectionary readings are Isaiah 25:1-9; Psalm 20; Revelation 22:1-5; Matthew 5:38-48.

This may give the follower of the Lectionary a difficulty as the Matthew passage was used in Epiphany of Year A, in February 2017, so the congregation may have heard it fairly recently.

In the light of the introductory comments above, it might be profitable to substitute the Beatitudes, in either Matthew’s or Luke’s version, or the Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79).

Psalm 20

The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!

You know that trouble is coming when these types of prayers are said by the masses for their king. There is a mix of ‘we’s and I’s’ praying for victory and help in battle moving between a prayer of the people who desire victory for their king or perhaps strength for their monarch (a context we would be familiar with); and prayers of the king himself, perhaps David having an eye towards others benefiting from these words as they succeed him as king.
Remembrance Sunday

The thought of victory in life and God’s answers in our times of trouble does not negate the trouble coming. This Psalm points us to a trust in God rather than in horses and chariots, or perhaps even our own strength. The Psalm goes further than merely asking for victory. We see petitions for God to protect, help, support, remember, fulfil and answer. As we face times of trouble or go to battle, there is more at stake than simply winning or losing and this Psalm points us to a God who is concerned with justice, peace and reconciliation, regardless of the type of conflict we face.

Isaiah 25: 1-9

It may be worthwhile including verse 10 in the readings as this will allow a nice rounding off with the repetition of the mountain motif.

This passage has a tension running throughout, as we move between cities being ruined and songs being stilled, to a feast for all people and death being swallowed up forever. As we are continually bombarded in the media by scenes of cities being devastated, aliens being persecuted and natural disasters, we look to God for answers. Often when they do not come we can feel disheartened, but in these verses we glimpse a vision of a future, where every tear is wiped away and death has been swallowed for ever. These images resonate with the Revelation passage from our lectionary readings and also with the ideas put forward by Jesus in Matthew; that in seeking the Kingdom of God, we must work together for peace, reconciliation and justice and not be satisfied until, like the feast upon the mountain, everyone is fed.

Matthew 5: 38 – 48

In this passage we are seeing Jesus reframe how we respond to violence. He engages with the Law and then reinterprets for his contemporary reality.

What we knew before, in an eye for an eye etc., was perhaps a step forward from the vengeful and barbaric version of fair recompense or retribution between tribes that was culturally acceptable in years gone by. What we see here is the challenge to step forward again. To move on from the idea that ‘whatever you did to me I am allowed to do back to you’, as being ‘fair’ or ‘just’ and to move to a place of radical forgiveness and ideas of non-violence.

There are questions for us here that affect our everyday and resonate with our wider experience. What is ‘fair’? This is something I face most days with my children, who often respond to situations with the phrase ‘...but that’s not fair...’.

How would we describe justice? What does justice look like? With recent court cases in the news causing questions over sentencing, major enquirers into disasters such as Grenfell Tower, we may ask where we see justice. But would we recognise justice if we saw it?
When we see misuse or abuse of power, should we shame those involved? What does it look like or sound like, to speak truth to power?

There are many questions we can ask in a variety of different ways depending on our context or life experience. Regardless of how we experience fairness and justice, we can all relate to how radical it looks when peace and reconciliation are the response to and the result of anger and violence.

Revelation 22: 1 – 5

What we see in this vision of the New Jerusalem is the open, welcoming and radiant city. A city where the river of life flows through its middle and on either side we see fruit and healing. This excerpt has the feel of the Isaiah passage, with the feast on the mountain, where all are welcome being echoed by the open gates spoken of throughout Revelation. The throne of God centred in the city speaks of a hope for the future, rooted in the earth. As the city descends we see a new creation without the need for the loss or destruction of the earth, but a reconciliation of the human and natural and divine.

This vision allows us to see an open invitation into the presence of God. Perhaps we might ask what would it look like if we allow this vision of the future to shape our lives in the present?

Sermon ideas

The Christian tradition includes the great theological gift of Just War Theory. With many derivations, most famously from the writings of St Thomas Aquinas in the 13th Century, this overarching theory of the Law of Armed Conflict still deeply informs the ethical principles of warfare in military training systems around the western world.

One of its classic distinctions is between the rules governing the decision to go to war (in Latin *ius ad bellum*, literally law on the way towards war) and the rules governing the proper conduct of those at war (*ius in bello*, law in the course of war).

*ius ad bellum* is where controversial debates rage. Was our country right to make war in that situation? Was it the last resort available to us to prevent a greater evil? Are we sure we weren’t acting out of vindictiveness? And so on.

*ius in bello* is where it is much easier to find common ground. Do we as a nation rigorously obey the Geneva Conventions? Can we be judged on the humanity with which we treat our prisoners of war? And so on.

It is not necessary, surely, to make the stark choice between Remembrance Sunday as a militaristic parade and Remembrance Sunday as a peace festival, as if those two things must be ‘either/or’. With the help of lots of stories in Old Testament history (not least the David
Remembrance Sunday

and Saul stories), and from Christian history too (St Francis the wounded soldier, St Magnus the praying warrior), the Gospel can be proclaimed vividly through the principles of *ius in bello*.

There is much that can be said homiletically about courage in a place of conflict that was not of one’s choosing; nobility in the exercise of compassion at unexpected moments; faithfulness to the dream of peace in the midst of violence.

**Time with children**

A memorable children’s talk will be conveniently to hand if there are serving military personnel or veterans present who are wearing medals. Almost every medal tells a story that is likely to be quite personal and evocative.

However, even the order in which they are worn tells its own story. Medals are not worn in strict order of acquisition, but in categories. Looking at the wearer face-on, and reading from the viewer’s left to right (i.e. from nearest the breast-bone towards the shoulder) the categories are as follows (with the medals in most categories worn in chronological order of award):

Gallantry medals: VC, DFC etc. – these are worn in order of seniority of award, and will always hint at an amazing story about the individual’s courage.

Campaign medals: Op Telic (mainly Iraq), Operational Service Medal (often nowadays with Afghanistan clasp, or in older veterans referring to service in Northern Ireland) etc. – these are much more common amongst current personnel than they would have been a generation ago, and will tell something of the person’s story.

Celebratory medals – most commonly the Queen’s Jubilee medals, with the Diamond Jubilee medal the one with the mainly dark red ribbon.

Service medals – long service and good conduct, reserve service medals, and so on.

What are the qualities celebrated in the award of these medals; and how do those qualities compare to the Christian aims of courage, compassion, loyalty, integrity?

One more thing: if the wearer has medals on his/her right lapel (your left as you are looking at the individual), those are likely to be the medals of a deceased close relation. Those may be different because they are much older medals, from WW1 or WW2. Here the lesson might be that we learn much of our Christian commitment from the inspiring example of those who go before us; and we should celebrate that as we learn about the faith.

**Prayers**
Remembrance Sunday

The following prayers are printed without conclusions, as each can be ended with a Collect said by the whole congregation, or with the Lord’s Prayer (depending where the congregation normally says it in their regular service).

**Prayer of Adoration, Confession and Supplication**

In a sea of Flanders mud and a scream of ordnance there is no praise, no worship, no adoration...

... until a determined poppy wriggles through the ooze and splashes primary colour across the grey-brown nightmare...

... until a skylark finds the safe air above the shell-arc and insists on squeezing her song into the fragments of silence.

In the weary dry beige eternity of the Afghan desert there is no praise, no worship, no adoration...

... until a child in a pink track-suit with a green kite runs across the horizon...

... until the sun catches the veined blueness of lapis lazuli lying on a jingly-market stall.

We are in the place of peace and prosperity, where we can bring praise that is due from all the people of God, and worship that is the delight of our lives and hearts, and adoration for majesty and providence and love.

We are in the place of recollection and repentance, where we can mourn the decisions that tear apart the nations and destroy peoples God has made and chosen and settled and blessed. We can beg forgiveness for the excesses of cruelty found in the fog of conflict, for mad decisions made in moments of desperation, for things done that surely could never be done anywhere else.

And as we reflect on the sins and terrors committed by other people far away, we ask forgiveness for ourselves when we have benefited from those actions, when we have behaved to those around us as if we were in a battle, as if only our end-desires mattered.

So let each one of us pray instead that we will occupy this world like a Flanders poppy, brave in smallness and bright in promise; like a skylark, refusing to let violence be the last word, the last sound; like a polished piece of lapis lazuli, beautiful even if beauty has been lost around.

**Prayer of Intercession**

We give thanks that in a world so complicated we cannot understand it all, people seek peace and address evil in so many different ways, each determined and brave, each making a difference for good or ill but doing their best. So we give thanks and pray blessing for:

Men and women who are willing to stand between enemies to make it impossible for them to hurt each other.
The staff of United Nations agencies dedicated to the rights of children, the feeding of the hungry, the protection of the earth’s ecology, the rescue of refugees, the dignity of citizens in every country.

Charities established to support those affected by conflict: the British Legion, Help for Heroes, the Erskine Hospital, the Earl Haig Fund.

Experts in mediation, working with those who suffer brokenness in family life, in business relationships, in churches and community organisations.

People of power in countries of fragility, with the chance to keep peace and the chance to wreak war on helpless populations.

Voices of hope that speak the words that bring a sense of peace, that sing the songs that inspire justice, that describe the touch that gives gentleness to the world.

People known to us who can be impatient or aggressive when they are afraid, and who need to be loved and reassured even when they think they are in charge.

People known to us who give us stillness and quietness in our souls and make peacemakers of us by magic.

People of prayer who reach and hear and see the peace of Christ every day and carry it about as a gift to the world, free and flowing.

Musical suggestions

**Hymn for the Remembrance Season**
For St Nicholas’ Church, HMS DRAKE, Autumn 2012
(Tune: “Highwood”, or “Lord of the Years”)  

1. Lord of the seas, whose voice disarmed the tempest,
   God of the deep that shore and shore divides;
   Be their security who guard earth’s waters,
   Whose duty sets them on the breathing tides.

2. Lord of the land, whose voice made mountains tremble,
   God of all tribes, for peace that stills we pray.
   Nerve those who stand between untrusting peoples;
   Bless those whose lives are risked for freedom’s day.

3. Lord of the air, whose voice fills skies with thunder,
   God of the sun’s fierce blaze, the moon’s grey light;
   Hold those who serve and soar on wings uplifted,
Remembrance Sunday

With mercy-pinions like the dove’s soft flight.

4. O Lamb of God, you share the Father’s glory
Sounding as hymns from air and land and sea.
Drive out this wild world’s sin, and peace shall triumph,
Heal hatreds, and our children shall be free.

CH4 11 – ‘Psalm 20’ – As per the lectionary reading

CH4 192 – ‘All My Hope on God Is Founded’ – Picks up on themes from Psalm 20

CH4 172 – ‘Sing for God’s Glory’ – Some of the themes from Isaiah and Revelation

CH4 527 – ‘Lord, Make Us Servants of Your Peace’ – Themes of peace and reconciliation