

Sermon preached on Remembrance Sunday Ovington 2021

Micah 4: 3He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;

One of the television images from 2021 that will continue to haunt me is the interview with a mother whose son was killed in Helmand province serving with the military in Afghanistan. I guess she spoke for a great many families who suffered loss over a period of nearly 20 years in some very difficult and challenging fighting.

*The question this mother was asking was “Was it worth it?”. Her son had decided to join the military. She was a bystander. But his death in Helmand was very directly her loss. The one thing that could have made that loss tolerable was if it achieved something. But when American and British troops withdrew from Afghanistan in such disarray, when the Taliban were back in control after 20 years of war, of course she was not convinced it was worth it.

*Yes, a great many lives were lost. We can point to the successes of our time in Afghanistan – education for women and girls, new levels of expectation in life, a greater sense of democracy. But the reality is that this was an alien war, a war somewhere far removed from where we are, where we live. We were fighting people who did not seem a direct threat to us and our aims in going to war there were not always clear. But defeating the Taliban had to be one major aim, and we did not fulfil that.

*No wonder, then, that this one woman, and many others I imagine, find it hard to comprehend what it all means. It is clear that many who served went with a strong sense that they wanted to improve the lot of Afghans and believe that they succeeded whatever the outcome of the war. But those who love them have to live with the consequences of their decision. They bear much of the pain of war and they cannot understand.

My father grew up in Forest Gate, in east London, and used to tell me about the night that a Zeppelin was shot down over Hackney marshes. I was very shocked when he first told me about it because I had always thought that the First World War was fought abroad. We don't hear so much about the bombing by Zeppelins or the naval attacks on the east coast – or indeed Gallipoli or Mesopotamia. We have localised pictures.

* Remembrance has always been about European Wars, ever since, that is, the Boer War which, I suspect, was the first time we really began to have war memorials in this country. It was these European wars that were on our doorstep, that were an immediate threat. The guns in France could be heard on the Hackney Marshes – there was no hiding from that war. But countless other conflicts, from Korea through Kenya to Cyprus were more distant. Only with the advancement of modern media did we become so aware of wars in foreign places.

*Moreover, the two World Wars which have always been the starting point for our War Memorials, required hundreds of thousands of men to enlist and so touched every community in the nation. This was a new kind of war which could not simply be managed by our standing military. That in itself created a very different mood in the nation. By contrast, the post war conflicts have generally only involved those who have chosen a service career.

*And, finally, both the European wars saw us on the winning side, triumphant in our stand against tyranny, expansionism and Fascism. There were those who disagreed with fighting, but on the whole the nation felt that right had prevailed. And when they looked on the death of people they loved, that victory helped them to understand. People were realistic enough to know that resisting evil demanded sacrifice, and that sacrifice had paid off

It was early 1982 in east Hampshire. There was some serious discussion about Remembrance and its future. Some believed that, like Trafalgar Day, Remembrance had outlived its purpose. Only a few months later and my Churchwarden's son was commanding 3 Para and we were hearing with concern the news of the death of his colleague Colonel H Jones and wondering what was coming next. There is no doubt that the Falklands War re-invigorated Remembrance and helped it to develop.

*I think it is true to say that every year, now, we realise more and more what war has cost. At first it was a campaign by those who fought in Burma to have their contribution recognised. Then there were issues about the Merchant Navy, and about Colonial forces for whom there had never been enough recognition of the part they had played. Then there were those courageous women who flew planes from where they were assembled to the airfields where they were needed, unarmed in the event of interception. Or there were those civilians who had a particularly hazardous part to play, not least the fire service in places like Coventry or the East End of London.

*In that sense Remembrance perhaps becomes more inclusive every year. That is not to diminish the sacrifice made by those who were on the front line, regular soldiers or enlisted men, wherever they served. That was a very direct and sacrificial role. But it is to recognise that the two World Wars caught up an entire nation, an empire, in all kinds of dimensions and that most of us, growing up after the war, are unaware of the scale of all of that. And even in a relatively short period of 50 years of ministry, there have also been three occasions when members of my parish were directly involved in difficult conflict situations, in Iran and in Kuwait, and one which I have already mentioned in the Falklands. War and conflict has a long reach.

So this year I want to encourage the way in which we have increasingly recognised all who have paid a price in war while, at the same time, giving priority to those who laid down their lives. If Remembrance is going to hold its meaning in the future, (and I know that some people are very concerned that at some point in the future people will begin to forget) then we need to go on developing Remembrance.

*Soon after I retired I visited both Chilbolton and Bramley churches: both had War Memorials and what stuck out was that both had the name of someone killed in recent conflicts: Iraq in Chilbolton and Afghanistan in Bramley. It is something of a rarity to find reference to modern conflicts on our War Memorials. But it puts us in touch with people like the mother with whom I began, people whose loved ones have been killed or seriously injured while serving. If we can share something of their pain we are recognising the price they have paid, as non-combatants.

*And with them I would like to add those from two World Wars and other conflicts who had to live with loss for the rest of their lives. We remember the many women whose young men were killed in the First World War – or the families of those killed in a wider theatre in the Second World War. They had to live with the consequences of the ultimate sacrifice made by those they loved.

*For them Remembrance must have been a daily occurrence for the rest of their lives, with all the reminders provided by changed circumstances. Talking with Liz the other day we were remembering so many of the teachers who taught her who remained unmarried as a result of war. They, too paid a price and they paid it over a great many years. In modern jargon war was, for them, a life changing experience.

As we watch modern reconstructions of the battles in the trenches in the First World War we are left wondering how anyone knew what was going on. But confusion has always been one of the side effects of war. Such is the intensity of experience in war that the local experience trumps everything. In this morning's service we have had readings which invite us to look at the bigger picture.

*The prophet Micah sees God as being concerned with the reality of human conflict – he is not indifferent to it. If we are sometimes in awe of powerful nations elsewhere, this passage was a reminder that God has a concern about their overweening powerfulness. “He shall arbitrate between powerful nations far away”. But Micah also realises that if we want to reverse processes by which we find ourselves embroiled in war, it requires God's help. Human ingenuity is not enough.

*In the reading from John's Gospel I fear that we are so familiar with its message that we miss the extraordinary change it signalled. “You are my friends” Jesus tells the disciples “if you keep my commandments”. In a world where gods were feared because they were capricious and lived in another dimension here is Jesus promising friendship in the great project of spreading the love of God. There is hope in spite of human conflict.

*I have not mentioned COP 26 but it would not be right to ignore it and the massive issues it has been addressing. COVID and COP have both, in the last two years, reminded us powerfully that only by international co-operation can we meet the threats to our survival – not to our way of life, but to any way of life. There are still those in our world today who see isolation, aggression or the arms race as the way forward. If we are to take seriously the message of Remembrance we need to think co-operation as the only way forward – because that is what is needed in 2021 if we are to have a future as a human race.