



Sermon: - 12th November 2017

Choose this day whom you will serve

Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25; Matthew 25: 1-13

Simon Jenkins, journalist and author, wrote an article in the Guardian a couple of days ago. He suggested that the time for remembrance is past. His article includes this comment, "Almost all the conflicts in the world are caused by too much remembering: Britain should stop wallowing in past traumas and move on!" The picture on the screen accompanied the article, what looks like three generations of people letting go, and presumably moving on. Could he be right? Possibly Tony Robbins would agree with him. Robbins is a popular American author, entrepreneur, and life coach. He's known for his seminars, and self-help books. He coined the phrase: "If you do what you've always done you'll get what you've always got." Is there any evidence that our annual ritual of remembrance has prevented further wars and conflicts? And if there is not, then perhaps Jenkins is right and the time has come to move on!

However, I think that there is another way of looking at it and although I'm in sympathy with much of what Jenkins says in his article I don't agree with his solution. Jenkins considers that because we are losing touch with the kind of personal contact with war that existed in the years immediately following the First and Second World Wars there is now no sense of collective grief and Remembrance Day has become, for him, just another charity event, a military parade, an event that almost validates war by giving its horrors religious respectability. I don't agree. I think there is another way to look at it and Tony Robbins phrase, "If you do what you've always done you'll get what you've always got," is in fact a key to that.

Robbin's little axiom reminds us that war is all too possible. If we indulge in Nationalism, jingoism, xenophobia, without also hanging on to a sense of our common humanity, our need for peace, or our responsibility to others, we can find ourselves drawn into hatred, ridicule, and condemnation of those who are different. But Remembrance Day, properly understood, is not about nationalism, jingoism, and xenophobia but rather is about reminding ourselves of the tragic consequences of nationalism, jingoism, and xenophobia.

Our Old Testament passage this morning focuses on the covenant between God and Israel. God reminds the nation of Israel of all that he has done for their benefit and asks them if they, for their

part, are still prepared to worship him and only him. They are given a choice, to continue following their own ways, or to commit themselves to following God's ways. Choose this day whom you will serve... Basically is what the Prophet is asking, is, will you serve God or will you serve yourselves.

Our annual celebration of Remembrance is a kind of covenant. It's a covenant with those who died to bring peace to this world. It's a covenant with all those who sacrificed their lives in this cause, be they Americans, Canadians French, Russian, British, ... or German, Italian, Japanese... All those ordinary footsoldiers who simply obeyed orders and died for something so much bigger than themselves. It's a covenant to remember sacrifice of whatever nation and determine that it will not happen again. Is it successful? The years since the Second World War have not been entirely peaceful. However, the nations which were directly involved in that conflict have worked hard to maintain peace since that time. Conflicts that have arisen since then have, by and large, involved nations which did not experience that horror. Jenkins deplores what he calls our fixation on the German wars commenting that there are 8000 books on war currently in print in the United Kingdom. But is it not by reminding ourselves of the horror of war that we also remind ourselves of our covenant to maintain peace?

I don't know about you, but when I find myself commemorating this annual act of remembrance I also find myself remembering with gratitude the sacrifice made by others on my behalf. I find myself deploring actions of any politician, no matter which nation or party, which have the potential to inflame acts of violence between nations. I find myself determined to maintain peace in whatever way I can, in my home, in my church, local and national, in my country.

If we were to do as Simon Jenkins suggests and put behind us this annual act of remembrance, what might be the outcome? If we forget the horror of war is there not a danger that we also forget to strive for peace? Rather than characterising this event as wallowing in the past, like Tom O'Shanter's wife, "nursing our wrath to keep it warm", should we not see it as our nation's, "note to self: if you do what you've always done you'll get what you've always got!" In other words, if you foster hatred and enmity, you will get conflict and war. It is a chance to remind ourselves of the cost of war and in that remembering determine that we will not pay that price again.

And in considering our New Testament passage, if we liken ourselves to the wise and foolish virgins, it seems to me that the wise virgins were the ones who remembered. They remembered to trim their lamps, they remembered to take extra oil, they remembered their responsibility to the bridegroom, they remembered lessons they had learnt in the past about what happened when

they neglected to prepare. The foolish virgins on the other hand, forgot. They forgot to take care, they forgot to consider their responsibilities, they forgot and in forgetting they paid a price. The Israelites had a choice – serve God or themselves. The ten virgins had a choice – remember their preparations or forget and be found sleeping. We have a choice. Will we remember the cost of war, the pain of war, the destructiveness of war and vow to work for peace? Or will we forget, put the past so much behind us that we do not learn its lessons and risk repeating its mistakes? Will we serve God and his purposes of unity among his children or will we serve the world in its self-centredness, greed and lack of compassion?

Choose this day whom you will serve... Honest remembering or careless forgetting? Peace or conflict? God or the world?