

## Remembrance Sunday by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> November 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: The latest recipient of the Victoria Cross (The Guardian, 2015)<sup>1</sup>  
Poem: *Attack* by Siegfried Sassoon<sup>2</sup>  
Poem: *Perhaps* by Vera Brittain<sup>3</sup>  
Psalm 124  
Micah 4:1-5  
Matthew 5:1-12

### Introduction

I wonder what Remembrance Sunday means to you? On a practical level, it normally means making sure that you're wearing a poppy before you come to church. For the choir, it usually means planning a quick get-away so we can be down at the War Memorial in the centre of town in time for the Act of Remembrance. This year, of course, that has been recorded, and so we have a little more time to spend here in church to reflect on the meaning of the day.

For many people, today is a day of intense emotion. My mother, whose brother was killed in the Second World War, used to avoid going to a public gathering, although I'm pleased to say that in more recent years she did come along, wearing her brother's George Cross with pride.

For myself, Remembrance Sunday has become rather emotional, even though there's nobody I've known personally who has died in any armed conflict. I am full of admiration for my uncle Arthur, and learned recently about my great uncle Arthur, who was killed in action in the First World War. But the more I think about the devastation caused by wars past and present, the more overwhelmed I become with sadness.

### Giving thanks

The three readings we heard earlier capture something of the range of issues that come up when we reflect on war. The enormous courage of Lance Corporal Joshua Leakey, VC, is an example of the best in human nature which the adversity of war brings out. Not only was he fighting to bring peace and freedom to the people of Afghanistan, but he showed selfless courage to rescue comrades who would otherwise have died. And so a major focus of our commemoration today is to give thanks for the sacrifice that millions have made in conflicts over the past 100 years so that we could live in peace and freedom from tyranny.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/feb/26/victoria-cross-awarded-to-lance-corporal-for-afghanistan-rescue>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57323/attack-56d23aba391f5>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/www1lit/collections/item/1744>

## Sadness

But for me, Remembrance Sunday is also a time to reflect on the terrible suffering caused by war. Siegfried Sassoon's poem is just one of many from the First World War and subsequent conflicts that show the horror of the battlefield. When George, Adam and I visited the cemetery of Cerny-en-Laonnois, in North-eastern France, and when I visited Brookwood Cemetery in 2014 with the children of St Michael's School, I was struck by the vast number of headstones, commemorating those who lost their lives in the wars. Some had the simple inscription "A soldier of the Great War, known unto God". They, at least, were given a decent burial. Many thousands were never recovered, and still lie somewhere under the mud where they fell.

This Wednesday will be the one hundredth anniversary of the burial of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, and there are programmes about this on the radio and television this week. The idea to bury an unknown soldier in Westminster Abbey came from an army padre on the Western Front, and the story of the transportation of this soldier from France to his burial in his final resting place shows how this act came to have powerful symbolic significance for the millions of people who never had the chance to bury their loved ones lost in action. Among the guests of honour at the ceremony on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1920 were about hundred women who had been chosen because they had each lost their husband and all their sons in the war.<sup>4</sup> And in a similar way, Remembrance Sunday has become the focus for all the grief caused by war throughout the world, and perhaps for many a focus of countless other griefs and losses.

## A better way

There is one other vital element in today's Act of Remembrance which will take place up and down the country, which is about looking to the future and making a commitment to work for peace and harmony among the nations. This has to mean more than simply avoiding going to war again. The First World War, it was hoped, was going to be the "war to end all wars". Sadly, the human race shows no sign of giving up its propensity to promote self-interest and settle disputes by violent conflict. There is more to peace in the world than international conventions and diplomacy. There will never be peace without justice, and there will never be justice until people's values and ways of living reflect those of the Kingdom of God.

In today's reading from the prophet Micah, we heard a vision of a time when people will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks, where human creativity and effort will be used solely for building prosperity and security for all. The key to this, according to Micah's prophecy, would be when all nations turn to the Lord and seek to follow his ways.

'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;

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<sup>4</sup> Hanson, Neil (2005). *The Unknown Soldier*. London: Doubleday, quoted in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Unknown\\_Warrior](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unknown_Warrior) (accessed 7th Nov 2020)

that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.<sup>5</sup>

The ways of God's kingdom are spelled out for us by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, especially in the Beatitudes which we heard for our Gospel reading today. This is about hungering and thirsting for righteousness and justice, about humbling ourselves before God our Maker, about being the peacemakers in every situation, at home, at work, and in the wider society. This is about seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness<sup>6</sup>.

Micah does not assume we should just sit around and wait for this era of peace to happen. We who belong to God must commit ourselves to following God's ways:

For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god,  
but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God  
for ever and ever.<sup>7</sup>

We Christians may be a minority in our country, but we have many opportunities to influence the direction of policy and the values that are espoused in public life, and to make a difference where we are. And when we do so, even in a small way, we bring the light of hope and the comfort of God's love to others.

## **Conclusion**

So this Remembrance Sunday, as we give thanks for the sacrifice of others, and as we mourn for the loss of life and the suffering of those left behind, let us all, as individuals and as the people of God, commit ourselves to work for justice and peace for all peoples, under the kingship of God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

And as we prepare to bring to God the needs of the world in prayer, let us now take a few moments to reflect on the meaning of this day, as we listen to music played by Jane Palmer our organist and watch the photographs that follow.

*Slide show: A Commemoration of the First World War.*

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<sup>5</sup> Micah 4:2 NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6:33

<sup>7</sup> Micah 4:5 NRSV