

Swords and ploughshares by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 10th November 2024
(Remembrance Sunday) at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: Micah 4:1-5

What does Remembrance Sunday mean to you?

Here are some of the things that it means to me:

- a reminder of the terrible effects of war and of the suffering and loss caused by humanity's inhumanity
- gratitude for those who have sacrificed their lives or their physical or mental health in the cause of freedom and justice, including the sacrifices of their family members
- inspiration at the courage and dedication of those who have fought for our freedoms
- commitment to do whatever we can to bring peace and justice in our world

Micah 4:1-5

I chose this passage because as we hear of the terrible devastation and suffering caused by the wars in the Middle East, Ukraine and Sudan, and as the future looks uncertain and dangerous, this passage affirms the possibility of a world that is free of war and violence. It shows that human ingenuity that has been used to create weapons of war can be turned to better use in making tools for growing food and

other beneficial purposes. Swords can be turned into ploughshares. Micah's vision brings a message of hope when we may be tempted to despair that things could ever be better.

The prophecy speaks of a time when

they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.¹

This is a common image in the Old Testament of peace and prosperity, made possible by the absence of the threat of war. So what is needed for the world to reach this state of peace and harmony?

The prophecy begins with a picture of many nations streaming to the Lord's temple in Jerusalem:

“that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths²”

The following verse speaks of God arbitrating between far-off nations.

Facing reality with hope

But is this all “pie in the sky”? An unrealistic bit of idealism?

If you read the whole of the book of Micah you will see that it is full of realism about the stark reality of injustice and destruction in the world. Micah calls out oppression of the poor by the rich, and exploitation of the vulnerable by those who have political and economic power. He warns that failure to change their ways will lead to disaster. The

¹ Micah 4:4 NRSV

² Micah 4:2 NRSV

destruction of Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel, and of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, are both prophesied. But interspersed with these prophecies of gloom are visions of restoration and hope. It is in Micah that we have the famous prophecy about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem, which came true hundreds of years later in the birth of Jesus. It is in Micah that we read these words:

Who is a God like you,
who pardons sin and forgives the transgression
of the remnant of his inheritance?
You do not stay angry forever
but delight to show mercy.
You will again have compassion on us;
you will tread our sins underfoot
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea³.

It may be hard to imagine that Micah's prophecy could ever be fulfilled as long as human beings are in charge of the world's affairs, but God does promise that one day injustice will be put right, wars will cease and we shall live in peace and harmony in God's heavenly Kingdom under the rule of our Messiah, Jesus.

Our response today

But in the meanwhile, we are living in the world as it is now. So today, Remembrance Sunday, how should we respond to the reality of wars and violence today? Here are four suggestions:

³ Micah 7:18-19 NIV

First, it is right to lament, to weep with those who weep⁴, and not to put our heads in the sand. Yes, it is much easier not to listen to the news, to shield ourselves from the reality of what others are going through. And certainly, there is only so much bad news we can cope with at one time. But being aware of what's going on in the world is, I believe, an expression of loving your neighbour.

Second, we need to pray. And as we ask God to stop the violence, to guide the leaders of nations and to heal the broken, let us bring to God our own feelings about these events and the people who are caught up in them.

And third, let us do what *is* in our power to do, so that we can make our own small contribution to peace and harmony in the world. As Micah wrote:

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.⁵

As Micah wrote in chapter 6:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

In addition to the way we conduct our own lives, we can make a difference through our giving to charities who work elsewhere in the world. At the moment, Tearfund is

⁴ Romans 12:15 NRSV

⁵ Micah 4:5 NRSV

appealing for funds to help the Middle East crisis. We have a new MP who is keen to listen to his constituents.

Yesterday I heard an RAF chaplain, Rev Dawn Colley, giving “Thought for the Day” on the radio. I quote from her message:

“We remember with gratitude that our lives today are possible due to the actions of those who have gone before us. We should also remember that our actions today have an effect for generations to come”.⁶

Finally, we need to trust God, who is the King of the universe, and is ultimately in charge. Somehow in his infinite wisdom and power he will find a way to bring good out of all the evil which human beings have brought about through the use of our free will. God can work through any situation, and even through those who do not acknowledge him. Hitler was defeated. The Berlin Wall fell. Apartheid came to an end. And most importantly of all, Jesus died on the Cross and rose again to defeat the powers of sin and death and to offer us life and hope.

As Rev Dawn Colley also said in her message, “hope is an act of faith”. Let us put our faith in God, and through our solidarity with others and our prayers and personal actions, bring hope to the world.

⁶ Rev Dawn Colley (Methodist padre), BBC Radio 4 *Thought for the Day* 9th November 2024