



GRAY'S
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Sermon at Gray's Inn Chapel on Sunday 12th November 2023 – Remembrance Sunday

Revd Stephen Baxter

Text: Matthew 2:18

One of the readings set for Morning prayer this week was the account in Matthew of Herod's massacre of the Innocents with its harrowing quotation from Jeremiah:

'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

There is of a course a tragic parallel with the current experiences of so many families in Israel and Gaza where shocking, bewildering numbers of children have been killed or injured in the conflict. The news clips of the suffering of parents are desperately difficult viewing but important relays of the searing agony of war.

Photographic images of the effects of warfare of the last century of mechanised warfare are grimly consistent – images of destroyed towns and cities across different wars and theatres of war have a stark similarity ... Reims, Guernica, the East End, Leningrad, Dresden, Tokyo, Hanoi, Mostar, Mosul, Mariupol, Gaza.

And images of the suffering of civilian women, men and especially children caught up in the maelstrom of war have a timeless consistency in their projections of dazed helplessness, confusion, pain, exhaustion and fear. In our city during the Blitz 8,000 children were killed and a similar number seriously wounded.

And images from the frontlines of conflict are often arrestingly similar. The trench warfare of Flanders is being replicated in the war in Ukraine; the urban warfare of Stalingrad replicated in the buildings and tunnels of Gaza City.

Remembering is critical, not to glorify war but, as TS Eliot observed, It is only by accepting the past that we can alter its power and meaning. Or at least try to.

We remember with lament. Lament that war is the crushing antithesis of the life God wishes all his equally loved children to live and share. Lament the suffering we inflict on each other. Lament the waste of lives that could have been lived and the potential that could have been realised. Lament the impact of each life lost on partners, families, communities enduring for generations.

At the dedication service for the Chapel's war memorials in April 1920, the Bishop of Kingston described the memorials as memorials of suffering - the suffering of those who gave all, suffering of those whose lives who irretrievably changed, suffering of families and communities deprived of the talents and charisma of those who did not return.

I've been captivated by the Chapel's war book from the First World War and its accounts of those named on the memorial – Inn members with remarkable gifts, brilliant potential, commitment to service as lawyers and servants of their country. I was particularly struck by Lieutenant-Commander Young, who commanded a launch in the Zeebrugge raid of April 1918 with the objective of blockading the harbour. He was killed when his boat was shelled by German guns. One who served under Young's command reflected "He was one of the finest officers we ever had, and was loved by all the men. He volunteered for the job in the full knowledge that he had little chance of returning alive."

The writer JB Priestley, injured just before the Battle of the Somme, looked back on the Bradford of his youth:

"There are many gaps in my acquaintance now; and I find it difficult to swap reminiscences of boyhood. The men who were boys when I was a boy are dead. Indeed they never even grew to be men. They were slaughtered in youth; and the

parents of them have grown lonely, the girls they would have married have grown grey in sisterhood, and the work they would have done has remained undone."

These are experiences of communities across the world being repeated in Ukraine, Gaza and Israel.

We also must lament factors that create war that stain our corporate history as a church or nation - colonialism, racism – especially anti-semitism, discrimination, disproportionate responses to attack – such as the Gulf Wars.

Active lament for and interest in ongoing conflict are crucial, especially as so often the media want to move quickly on to new news. I was talking to journalist last week who was about to return to Ukraine to report for The Guardian. He told me that Putin is waiting for the allies of Ukraine to become collectively bored of the conflict and to lose appetite for support. The Russians have probably lost around 150,000 men and women but Putin sees this as a small price, given Russian resources and in the context of the c.25 million Russians killed in the second world war.

And we remember in humble thankfulness for each and every sacrifice. in the service of others - those who gave up lives they would have loved to live and thereby followed the example of Jesus Christ who laid down his life for all. As Rowan Williams astutely observed, those who spoke most sense from a Christian point of view about the experience of the trenches were those who understood that somehow in that experience something of the cross was appearing to them and through them. God does not always get what he wants in the chaos of our world. God's activity, God's glory, in these episodes of abject bleakness were in the myriad displays of individual selflessness.

We remember to commit ourselves to keep learning and to finding ways to shine light. Warfare and pandemic generate impulses to respect and build on our universal similarities and connectedness, which of course overwhelmingly outweigh our differences. Differences however have a gravitational pull if we are not vigorously active in turning from them.

Donne's poem For whom the bell tolls is increasingly quoted as its message is recognised as incisively pertinent:

Each is a piece of the continent,

A part of the main...

Each man's death diminishes me,

For I am involved in mankind.

Face-to-face encounter so often cuts through conditioned enmity and highlights similarity. During the brief but eternally poignant Christmas Truce on the Western Front of 1914, a soldier from London reported exchanging Christmas greetings with a German soldier who before being called to service for Germany lived in London and worked in a department store and apparently spoke pure Cockney. The Palestinian doctor Izzeldin Abuellaish who has lost three daughters in the conflict in Gaza explained how he had sent his daughters to a Creativity for Peace camp run by Israelis and Palestinians. His daughter Bessan commented how similar we are. She was right - if only she were here to share that message. I shall not hate – the thirst for war and violence should be replaced by a deep thirst for freedom, justice, equality and a shared future for Palestinians and Israelis.

As we remember in lament and thankfulness:

may we remember so we commit ourselves to recognising, celebrating and promoting our connectedness; may we promote courageously the cause of just peace;

may we reject oppression; may we yearn to be and pray for the peacemakers whose mission is so exalted that they will be called the children of God.