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Remembrance Sunday 2021

## “Who is on the Lord’s side”

*Micah 4: 1-5 & James 3: 13-18*

The city of Coventry is currently enjoying being the UK’s City of Culture for 2021. Its most famous icon is that image of the two Cathedrals: on the left, the ruins of the medieval building fire-bombed in November 1940, on the right the new Cathedral opened in 1962. It would have been easier to just rebuild the old one, to cover over the past. Instead they decided to leave it as it was, a constant memorial to the destruction and suffering which war brings, but to build alongside it something new, a sign of hope, a place for reconciliation.

On the morning after the bombing, they discovered two of the long medieval nails which had secured the wooden roof. They bound them together to form a cross and placed it on a stone where the High Altar had once stood. Today there are Cross of Nails communities all over the world, people committed to the work of reconciliation. Southwark Cathedral has become one of them, and if you visit you will find such a Cross on one of the side altars.

In Coventry, during the days that followed, they put together what we used this morning as our Confession. They could have been very Christian and prayed “Father, forgive them”, forgive them for what they’ve done to us, our cathedral, our city. But in fact they went much further: they prayed simply “Father, forgive”, forgive them, but also forgive us, because, as they said, *“when we pray about the problems of the world around us, we need to begin by acknowledging the roots of those problems in our own hearts.”*

Remembrance Sunday brings together the personal and the global. Let’s look at each in turn. At the personal level there is both bad and good. As the Coventry prayer says, the seeds of war lie in what Christians should not be afraid to call out as sin: greed, lust and so on. because it’s only when we acknowledge our sinfulness that we can seek forgiveness and start afresh. Repentance means to change, to turn round.

But at this more personal, individual level, War can also bring out the best in people. On this day we honour the commitment and self-sacrifice of those who went out and did not return, and those who are serving in the Armed Forces today. We owe them a debt of gratitude.

And at the global level, again there is a mixed picture. The suffering and destruction which War brings originates in both fear and ambition. It can result from the fear of losing your land, your freedom, your values. It can also be the lust for other people's wealth and the desire to exercise your power over other people who you've come to hate. We Brits have a mixed history in all of this. For three centuries we parried with other Western European nations to dominate what we designated as the New World, there for the taking. We claimed that we were bringing civilisation, education and Christianity, and to some extent that is true. But at the same time we were exploiting much to our own advantage, including the trafficking of millions of people simply because they were black and so not really human.

Our activity today is equally two-sided. On the one hand we have armed forces which maintain the highest standards of behaviour and engagement. You can argue whether or not we should have been in Afghanistan, but you cannot deny that the British forces which served there did so with commitment, with self-sacrifice, with a real concern and respect for the local people, and nearly 500 of them paid the ultimate price. Their families still live with that every day. On the other hand, as a nation we continue to play a major part in the Arms Race, exporting eight billion pounds worth of armaments every year, and half of that to places which we list as "countries of concern" due to their involvement in conflict, corruption and human rights abuses. And we take very little interest in their end use: who cares if Saudi Arabia is bombing hospitals in the Yemen as long as we are making a profit?

That perhaps illustrates one of the issues which always arises on Remembrance Sunday: the difference between nationalism and patriotism. Is there any place for nationalism in a Christian act of worship? One of the revolutionary things which the Christian Church did in its early years was to leap over national and racial boundaries. It broke the connection between a particular group of people and one piece of land. It challenged the power of Empire and spoke instead of a new community build on reconciliation.

But if not nationalism, there can be a place for patriotism, but only for those things where we can be justly proud, proud of what we did in the past, and proud of what we are doing now to establish justice and peace in the world. We stood up for those things in 1939, and many people paid the ultimate sacrifice. Global Britain must be about more than signing Trade deals.

So, looking ahead, what should we do? I've already said that at a personal level we need to look at ourselves, about how we live, and maybe where we should be taking a stand rather than walking by on the other side. At the more national and global level, it's right in an institution like this to draw attention on this day to the need to defend international law. What came out of the First World War was the

League of Nations, and it failed. What came out of the Second World War was the United Nations, and more widely a commitment to a rules-based international order. During the last few years that has come under threat, not least due to the dystopian policies of Donald Trump, and again this weekend the sabre-rattling from the Kremlin. And the UK has also weakened it, in what we've threatened to do over Northern Ireland and in the way we've totally ignored it with regard to Israel and Palestine.

Whatever commitments finally emerges from COP 26, and whether or not the signatories (and even more, the non-signatories) respect them, it does at least show that nations can, together, face up to the consequences of our actions. It is possible to commit ourselves to joint action within a legally-bound framework. We need to counter climate change in order to preserve the planet. But also, unless we do so, there will be no peace. The Second World War created roughly 20 to 25 million refugees. Global warming at the present rate will make 800 million people homeless. And that means War.

Remembrance Sunday is not a day for self-congratulation, nationalism or nostalgia. It's a day to remember those who yesterday made it possible for us to be here today. It's a day to say together, Never again. It's a day to realise that no-one should say, "God is on our side", but rather to ask, "Are we on God's side?".