

Micah 4: 1–5 & Epistle of James 3: 13-18

At the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, one hundred years ago, the Armistice signed by the Allies and Germany came into effect. It brought to an end four years of carnage: over 40 million military and civilian casualties, 20 million deaths and 21 million wounded. Not to mention eight million horses. One hundred years on we rightly remember those who gave their lives in the service of their country and in the belief that their cause was right.

The Preacher to this Inn, the Revd R J Fletcher, stood here and took for his text these words from Psalm 124: "If the Lord himself had not been on our side... when men rose up against us, they had swallowed us up quick when they were so wrathfully displeased at us. Yea the waters had drowned us and the stream had gone over our soul". He characterised the Allies' efforts as not nationalising God but opposing those who claim to be God – Prussia and its "Might over Right" – the idolatry of force. He spoke of those who had died: "Because of that which they have achieved for the world, and because of their fragrant memory, and because of the high example they have left to their generation and to posterity, we reject the thought that these young lives, even with all the seeds of promise which they showed, have in reality been wasted".

Others saw it differently. The poet Siegfried Sassoon was awarded the Military Cross back in 1916, but he later wrote home: "I believe that the war upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation has now become a war of aggression and conquest". In his poem "Aftermath" he asks

Have you forgotten yet?...
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled
sandbags on parapets?
Do you remember the rats; and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench--

*And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?
Do you ever stop and ask, 'Is it all going to happen again?'*

*Do you remember that hour of din before the attack--
And the anger, the blind compassion that seized and shook
you then*

*As you peered at the doomed and haggard faces of your
men?*

*Do you remember the stretcher-cases lurching back
With dying eyes and lolling heads--those ashen-grey
Masks of the lads who once were keen and kind and gay?*

Have you forgotten yet?...

*Look up, and swear by the green of the spring that you'll never
forget.*

In an act of Christian worship we rightly commemorate and lament the sacrifice of so many, and so many young, people. But we are also called to ask why nations go to war, then and now.

We tend to look at the First War through the lens of the Second. That may be misleading. The Christian tradition has long defined what is a “Just War”. There’s every reason to see 1939-45 as such, at least until the dropping of the Atomic Bomb. The causes of the First World War are far less clear and much more contested. The easy answer is the rise of Prussian militarism – it was to put an end to this that the Treasurer of Gray’s, later Lord Birkenhead, urged his colleagues in Government against seeking a ceasefire in December 1917. But there were many other factors: the rivalry between imperial nations; an intense nationalism in all the great powers; rival claims to control the Balkans; a rise in militarism and therefore the arms industry in France, Germany and also here in Britain; fears about who would take power if the Ottoman Empire collapsed; and inside many countries, the hope within the ruling class that a “good war” might diffuse the rise of socialism.

And if we are called, as the Prophet Micah said, to eschew war and seek peace, we must learn from the past and set our feet on a different path. I offer you these four thoughts.

First, we are, each one of us, called to be people of peace. We heard the writer of the Epistle of James urge us reject “bitter envy and selfish ambition” and instead “seek that wisdom from above which is peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits”. Otherwise, he says, we will create disorder, partiality and hypocrisy. It’s a verse which should appear on the screen every time someone opens their Twitter account. It reminds us, as the Confession did, that the causes of war lie deep within each one of us.

Second, we must be very careful about Nationalism. For its first three hundred years Christianity was stateless, and since then every alliance with a nation or an Empire has put at risk our belief that all people are created in the image of God and all people belong to one human family. Within that we may need other more particular places to belong, but “My country first” is a dangerous slogan which easily leads to war.

That brings us, naturally, to a third point: the need for international co-operation and the role of International Law. The Armistice of 1918 led towards the creation of the League of Nations. It failed, and after 1945 there came the United Nations. International Treaties are a way to seek peace and avoid war, even if, as with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, countries – including our own – sign and then ignore them.

And then, fourth, there is Militarism, one of the major causes of the First World War, and within that today the role of the Arms Trade. Last year the UK nearly doubled the value of arms sales to countries on the Government’s own list of human rights abusers. As we speak there are British-made jets and bombs killing children in the Yemen – over a billion pound’s worth sold to the Saudis last year. “If we didn’t do it, someone else would” we claim, “and we’re much more ethical”. In reality there is little monitoring or evaluation – making our profit is far more important.

Personal sin, Nationalism, the lack of International Order and Law, and Militarism... all present in 1914, and all evident today. Which leads me to suggest that we should now be turning away from the end of the First World War and looking instead at what happened in its aftermath, in the 1930's, and another war with even more casualties world-wide. Looking at the world today, and especially Trump's America, with the Left consumed by identity politics, the Right rushing to embrace nationalism, the demonising of anyone who is different, the encompassing language of hate, the rejection of multi-lateralism and international agreements, the attempt to muzzle a Free Press... are we heading in the same direction?

I finish with this. On the eleventh day of the eleventh month, one hundred years ago, a telegram boy knocked on the door of a terraced house in Shrewsbury. When Mrs Owen opened the door she could hear the bells of the nearby parish church ringing out joyfully to celebrate the Armistice. The telegram told her that her son had been killed a week earlier in France, aged just 25.

Wilfred Owen was perhaps the greatest of the First World War poets. He wrote about war and the pity of war. Like Sassoon, he had been awarded the Military Cross. Earlier in 1918 he had written "Strange Meeting", imagining the German soldier he had just bayoneted. The soldier says

*"I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . ."*

And so they sleep. The twenty million killed in the Great War, including the names on our own Memorial Board They sleep. The sixty million dead after the Second World War. They sleep. The victims of so many wars since: like the little girl in the Yemen, with a piece of metal slicing across her face, and on it the words "Made in Britain". She sleeps. But if they could open their eyes, and speak, they would surely ask us: when will you wake up?