

Remembrance Sunday 2020 sermon for SJB

In 1919 after the end of the first world war when remembrance day was inaugurated, it was hoped, and frequently stated, that this appalling cataclysm had been the war to end all wars. How very sad and hollow that all sounds now. Some generations, including my Grandmother's, experienced not one but two world wars, and conflicts on different scales, but equally devastating to those caught up in them, have always been a terrible and terrifying part of human life.

There was a period in my young adulthood when people began to say we should abandon remembrance Day as it glorified war. How wrong they were. Thank goodness we didn't go down that road.

In the 1940s and fifties when I was growing up, that thought would never have entered our heads. Every remembrance Sunday, after the 9-30 service at St Martins Grimsby, come rain come shine, I'd be swept along in the great crowd following our large church choir, all men and boys in those days, about half a mile down the road to the war memorial. Our glittering processional cross went before us, always visible up ahead. The town band would be ready and waiting for us to arrive, with row upon row of men and woman in uniform and solemn old men wearing enormous white gauntlets, carrying billowing banners. I'll never forget the bugle sounding the last post, the awesome 2 minutes silence, not daring to move a muscle, holding my breath for the bugle to sound reveille and then joining in those moving words that we will say again today at the end of this service: "at the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them". The laying of poppy wreaths, the stirring hymns accompanied by the brass band, all these things made a deep impression on me as a little girl. It didn't matter that I didn't fully understand. I just knew in the very depths of my being that it was very important indeed. And it still is.

Our freedom to live in a land that people still want to escape to rather than from was bought at a terrible price, the price of many, many young lives and ruined hopes and for their sacrifice we continue to give heartfelt thanks. On this day we also remember many others fallen in conflicts since then and their grieving families and continue to pray with all our hearts for world peace and justice.

As individuals we can't often influence whether there's war or peace on a national level of course, but we can try to be peace-makers in our own communities. I like the story of the little lad who asked his parents, "How do wars actually start?" His father began giving him a long and rather technical explanation and his mother interrupted impatiently, "He's much too young to understand all that jargon. Let me tell him!" She began her own explanation but the father grew very angry and interrupted her and soon a big shouting match broke out between them. The little boy was very frightened -he put his hands over his ears and shouted, "Stop it! Stop it! Now I know how wars start!"

Today, as well as many bitter conflicts, military and political, still going on in various countries including our own, we can't escape the ongoing global battle with the current pandemic. Nor can we ignore the fate of our planet if we fail to deal with pollution and global warming. The need for true wisdom to cope with all this conflict, doom and gloom has never been greater.

Today's readings from the old testament and the Gospel major on wisdom. The writer of the book of proverbs contrasts wisdom and folly by portraying them as two young women. There are dire warnings against falling for the wrong one. Our first reading describes wisdom as a radiant young woman of unfading loveliness, available to anyone who truly loves and desires her and fixes his heart and mind on receiving her. It sounds deceptively simple, doesn't it. If it's that simple why isn't she more visible in the hearts and lives of all of us when we have decisions to make? We often pray for wisdom for our leaders, but how do we really expect that prayer to be answered? Do we ourselves truly desire wisdom with all our hearts. Wisdom embraces far more than reasoning and understanding, though of

course they are important. True Wisdom also involves acknowledging a higher power than the human mind—none other than the spirit of the living God. He calls us to repentance and humility, compassion and the ability to stand in another’s shoes. Without all of these things there can be no true wisdom. I fear for a government whose members regard churches as mere recreational and leisure groups, part of the entertainment industry, inessential, simply liable to spread infection and so must be closed during lockdown. How has it come to this? Our church leaders are doing all they can to get things changed, so far with little success. But however upset we feel, God still calls us to go on patiently praying for them in all their difficult decision making. Especially that the common good will be their genuine concern. We are still called to obey the law and act as responsibly and wisely ourselves as we can.

Jesus’s story about the ten bridesmaids, five wise and five foolish, continues like the book of proverbs in the Jewish tradition of contrasting wisdom and folly. In different cultures weddings have their own particular traditions and in that culture, torchlight processions late in the evening are still known. It’s apparently quite common for the bridegroom to be delayed as he stops at various destinations before finally arriving at the wedding banquet. The bridesmaids’ job is simply to be there with their lamps alight ready and waiting to welcome him whenever he might arrive, however late. Then they joyfully light his way as they escort him in and the door is shut against the darkness outside. The ten bridesmaids in the story were all very similar: they all fell asleep and let their lamps burn low. The only difference was that the wise had prepared for the wait and so were there with their lamps brightly lit at the right time.

Jesus tells this story alongside other warnings about being prepared-- in the moment- -ready for when he comes. In other places he uses the wedding analogy referring to himself as the bridegroom and the kingdom of heaven as the wedding banquet. In another place he says, “Not everyone who says to me “Lord Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven but the one who does the will of my father who is in heaven.” In our wedding story here the foolish bridesmaids cry, Lord, Lord”,

but it's too late. That's very difficult for us to understand and accept. The kingdom of heaven is not an easy concept. It's about the way we live in this life as well as to do with the next. It's not about rules and regulations for their own sake but about a patient heart attuned to the love of God and neighbour. The wise bridesmaids didn't judge the foolish ones. That was only for the bridegroom. It's not for us to judge the hearts of others. Only for God. We discover his presence with us in many different ways- -in worship and prayer of course but also in the need of a neighbour, in a challenge to our faith, in the call to service, in the beauty of creation, in so many different ways if we lift up our eyes to see and respond.

But how and when will be his great and final coming at the end of time that the Bible talks about? We don't know how and we don't know when. All we do know is that it's in God's hands and he asks us to be trusting, patient and prepared, with our lamps lit- -reflecting the light of his love to one another, and out into our community and beyond as we wait.

He is present through all our waiting, especially as he meets us in the great act of remembrance that we re-enact week by week, in obedience to his command: "Do this in remembrance of me". Thankfully in this second period of lockdown at least our church building is not locked and we few are permitted to here on your behalf. We will hold you in our hearts and in our prayers and we ask for yours as together yet apart we keep this important Remembrance Sunday 2020 and journey on as best we can in faith and hope and love.

Amen.