

**10/11/2024 – Remembrance Sunday**  
**Great St Mary's, Cambridge – Civic and University Sermon**

*Micah 4: 1-5*

An armistice was signed in 1918, to end the fighting of the First World War. It took effect at 11am French time on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November. The war was never resumed. Since the 1940s its commemoration, at least in this country and in the Commonwealth, has fallen on the second Sunday of November. The focus has also broadened, initially to the Second World War, and then to other conflicts, as well as to wider themes of war and sacrifice, and the prayer for lasting peace.

Remembrance Sunday raises several questions for the preacher. Should we be observing it in church at all? Is there anything special one should say about the fallen that one can't say about everyone else who has died? Then, there are the bigger questions about war: why does God allow it? Should Christians participate in it? Is there such a thing as a legitimate conflict, and what are its ethical limitations?

Then, I have the historian's questions: to what extent is Remembrance Sunday the only civil ritual that still binds together the union of England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland? To what extent does Remembrance contribute to an anti-historical narrative of British exceptionalism, one that seems only to feed today's nationalism? Also, what does this British version of civic religion tell us about the secularisation processes of the twentieth century?

Further, sometimes I find myself wrestling with Remembrance Sunday because of my own conscience: are we sure we are always comfortable in using the language of the 'hero'? Or, more pressingly: can I legitimately bring together the memory of conflicts fought for dramatically different reasons, for example juxtaposing the fight against Nazi-fascism to the memory of the fallen of some late imperial war? Can I remember those who landed in Normandy to free Europe from horror and tyranny next to more recent wars, some of which I remember actively protesting against? These are uncomfortable questions, I know. And perhaps even more so if asked by

someone with a foreign accent, despite carrying a British passport. Indeed, as citizens of a democratic state we should always remember and respect those who we've sent to fight on our behalf, regardless of whether it be because of good or bad political decisions made by our representatives – they were doing our bidding, and therefore we bear the same responsibilities. In the past, Remembrance Sunday has had me occasionally moved to tears as well as frustrated. Sometimes it can bring us close to what I can only call a sin: thinking that, in whatever conflict, God is on our side. God is God, and his ways are not our ways. Let us not forget that 'Gott mit uns' (God with us) was written on the belts of Nazi soldiers.

But, despite all of this, we came here. We came because we have a duty to remember and give thanks. We came because we can't cease to pray and act for peace, whether it be in Israel and Palestine, Lebanon, Ukraine, in Yemen, in Sudan, or everywhere else in the world where violence and conflict disseminate terror and misery. We came here not to christianise a civil occasion but to say to those who lost a dear one in war, or to those who lost friends, or to those who lost limb or reason: we walk with you, we are near you.

I could close my sermon here: 'remember, act, pray'. That is already plenty. But, as a Christian, I find myself thinking that memory and goodwill are not enough. Is there a word from God to us in all of this? Is there something in the Christian hope that says more than 'do not forget and do good'?

The prophet Micah is not one for pious souls and do-gooders. His prophetic voice intertwines redemption with judgment. Just before our passage, two fierce long chapters are introduced in this way: 'Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds'. There is no Christian remembrance without a clear voice that says: 'woe' to those who plan evil and war. 'The night will come over them without visions', Micah continues. The warmonger is left without any dream of the future: the only thing that the tyrant can do is to believe his own lies - his own propaganda is his only vision. But Micah does not hide. Much of this evil has not come from afar – it is in us, it has taken us over, corrupted as we are by shady

interests and false prophets. There is no reflection on evil that does not start from examining ourselves and our own hearts – ‘a factory of idols’, to quote old John Calvin.

Nevertheless, despite our many contradictions, a word comes through: ‘they will beat their swords into ploughshares’. War will end, for good. Instruments of death will be used to produce food. Micah announces a future, a good future prepared by the Lord, in whose freedom will find our freedom.

- Freedom from *ignorance* (‘He will teach us His ways’).
- Freedom from *war* (‘they shall not learn war anymore’).
- Freedom from *want* (‘everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree’).
- Freedom from *fear* (‘no one shall make them afraid’).

It is such freedom from ignorance, war, want and fear that we demand – and this is the only way to stop the too many conflicts that surround us. It is in freedom that God’s relationship with humanity unfolds – it is the freedom of love; freedom to turn away from evil; freedom to restore a relationship with ourselves, with one another, with our enemy. ‘Nation will not take sword anymore against nation’. War should be no more. This is the will of God that the prophet does not shy away from announcing.

Do not lose hope, says Micah. Take evil seriously, take death seriously. God took it seriously, by facing it himself in Christ on the cross. Live instead the life of the resurrection. Do not let the brokenness, the suffering, the challenge define you. Rather, there is something deeper, something mysterious, something that is worth preserving, something that is worth cultivating, something in you, said Jesus, that I am willing to die to save.

Our true hope in life doesn't spring from the feelings of youth, lovely and fair though they are. Nor does it emerge from the possibilities of history, as many as they might

be. Our true hope in life is wakened and sustained and finally fulfilled by the God who is above us and in us and around us, nearer to us than we can be to ourselves. It encounters us as the great promise of our life and this world: nothing will be in vain. In the end all will be well. God meets us in the call to life: 'I live and you shall live.' We are called to this hope, and the call often sounds like a command - a command to see death, and resist death and the powers of death, and a command to love life and cherish every life, the life we share, the life of our communities, the life of our children, the life of our enemies, our whole life. To this God of hope and life who has won over the misery of this world, to him alone be the glory on this Remembrance Sunday. Amen.