

### Sermon for Great St Mary's 12 Nov 2023

The fiery words of the prophet Amos are not in the normal selection of readings for Remembrance Sunday. But this text, one of the set readings for the third Sunday before, Advent speaks right into the heart of what we are gathered to think about today. For Amos gives us a glimpse into the heart of God for his broken world – as we see in verse 24; let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream. God's desire is for an unstoppable justice, a fathomless righteousness.

And these concepts of justice and righteousness lie right at the heart of Remembrance. Because we gather here to mark the fact that justice and righteousness come at a cost in our world. A church historian writing in the cold war stasis of the 1970s predicted that remembrance ceremonies would fade away as the immediate memory of two world wars passed away. How wrong he was -we still count the cost of freedom and justice. The peace and stability we enjoy are hard won and must constantly be guarded. So as we look back today, we remember with thanksgiving those who have gone before us and secured our freedom. We will have our own pictures that come to mind in the silence, our family stories as we think of what that means. From the trenches of northern France to the cold dark waters of the North Atlantic, from the sands of Alamein to the jungles of Imphal and Kohima, empty plates at breakfast in an RAF mess after a night of heavy losses - you will all have your own particular image of what human cost lies behind our freedom. For the past fifteen years, my own mind turns in the silence to Signaller Wayne Bland, whom I knew as a 21 year old in Kabul and who did not come home. Many service personnel of my generation can go to the national memorial in Staffordshire and see names carved in stone whom they knew as living breathing people. And we give thanks today for those who continue to put themselves in danger's way for our sake.

Remembrance does not merely stir thankfulness within us for the past but also longing for the future. We know that somehow death, destruction and killing are alien to us and we long for them to vanish. To paraphrase the Irish poet Louis MacNeice, we somehow hear justice and righteousness calling to us as the ringing of an underwater belfry. Somehow the faint echoes speak to us of a

possibility that war and struggle have not and will not always be with us. Somewhere deep in our hearts we know it wasn't always like this – and we were not made for this.

Here again, the prophet has words for us, and he will not let us escape with superficial sentimentality. He warns those who glibly talk about the ultimate 'Day of the Lord' when things will be put right. He describes it as a day of darkness, not light. In vivid images he describes a hunted man escaping a lion, only to fall into the path of a bear, and when he finally reaches the sanctuary of home putting his hand on a snake. Amos warns his listeners that the day of the Lord will not simply be a stabilising of the status quo but a radical upheaval. When the justice of God breaks into our world, its effects will be far reaching and deeply troubling. Especially, Amos says, to those who enjoy peace and prosperity at the expense of others. A façade of polite worship and pious platitudes will not mask injustice.

Some eight decades ago, a British newspaper ran a correspondence series entitled 'what's wrong with the world today?'. G K Chesterton replied with two words – I am. As we face up to the catalogue of human history, we may feel overwhelmed by the idea that unstoppable, anonymous forces drive our destiny. But as E H Carr of Trinity College reminded us, nothing is inevitable. Historical causation is a matter of people at least as much as that of process. The dividing line between good and evil runs through every human heart, as Solzhenitsyn so acutely observed. When God looks for justice, his eye is on individuals and not merely institutions.

What hope then, is there for us, on the day of the Lord when it comes? God's justice will cut through our excuses and our platitudes, our own failures to seek and enact justice and righteousness. But as Amos himself hints in subsequent chapters, God's justice and righteousness also hold out hope to us. One cannot visit the memorials and cemeteries of Flanders without noticing the prevalence of one particular symbol – the cross. From rank on rank of gravestones to the cross of sacrifice at the centre of each cemetery, its presence is ubiquitous. Decoration after decoration for sacrificial gallantry follows suit – the Victoria Cross, the Military Cross, the Distinguished Service Cross. This is no

accident of geometry or aesthetics. The cross somehow functions as a symbol of sacrifice, service, justice and righteousness. Indeed, in Romans chapter 3 the apostle Paul explicitly holds up the cross as a symbol of justice.

For the cross shows us how seriously God takes the brokenness and injustice of our world – by stepping into it and bearing the burden himself. When we heed the words of Amos, and waken up to our own failures of justice and righteousness, the self-sacrifice of Christ in our place gives us hope. In the mysterious exchange of the Gospel, he offers us his righteousness in place of our unrighteousness. His justice in place of our injustice. On a personal level, we may know that we are forgiven and sent out as witnesses to the justice and righteousness of God. On a cosmic level, we may know that God does not stand aloof from his world, and will one day restore it. Those faint echoes of justice and righteousness we hear are not illusory, and one day that justice will roll and that righteousness will flow. Until then, we remember – and we hope.