

# Sermon for Remembrance Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> November 2016 at St Francis Church High Heaton

Remembrance Sunday comes in the Autumn as the leaves fall, an appropriate time to commend the fallen. The shorter days, with cold, dank light somehow matches the mood, rain mimics tears. The liturgical season is known as The Kingdom Season, our readings and liturgy invite us to think of the character of the Kingdom of heaven, both with us now and somehow yet still to come.... it's an in-between time of paradoxical character, and (like the world in which we live) it's shifting and uneasy.

Today's scriptures are a case in point... the gospel prediction of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (which actually happened in 70AD, obliterated by the Romans), the promise of wars and rumours of wars, nations rising against nations, earthquakes and famines, persecutions and betrayals, even war within families... it sounds very familiar. Millenarian thinkers have supposed that these presage the end of time, for example our OT reading Malachi *"the day is coming when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble, the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord "* (4:1) - if only.... but the truth is that they seem to be a constant context for every generation, and there is something both reassuring and disturbing about this, reassuring because it means that whatever the troubles of our own time, something of us will survive and things will change, disturbing because it feels that we are in a constant cycle of fearfulness and violence, punctuated only by brief periods of peace and social consensus...

Some have identified the election of Donald Trump and Brexit as signs of an end to the post-war consensus... Was the cold war era, in which we most of us have grown up and by which our world view has been shaped, a time of peace or war? This church was built in 1953, when the Republican Eisenhower replaced 20 years of Democrat rule in US, and Khrushchev succeeded Stalin in the Soviet Union. The year marked the end of the Korean War after a military stalemate, but it marked the beginning in earnest of the arms race we came to call Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD for short) which was not a comfortable existence! Since the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9<sup>th</sup> November 1989 there has been the hope of new liberal market-led consensus, but whilst we enjoy peace and our woes have only been economic, whereas in Afghanistan and the Gulf, Syria and so many other places peace is not the gift of this

generation, and British lives have been lost in those wars and we remember them too today. And then there is the challenge of pollution and consumption to the planet. Scarcer resources in the future will probably bring more conflict unless we find a way of living better.

In a recent article (*Church Times* 4/11/16) the American pacifist theologian Stanley wrote about resentment as a motor of conflict:

*"Mr Trump has given voice to a widespread discontent in our culture,"*

He mentions racism and fear of terrorism but goes on to describe

*"an even deeper pathology — namely, the profound sense of unease that many Americans have about their lives. That unease often takes the form of resentment against elites, but, even more troublingly, it also funds the prejudice against minority groups and immigrants."*

Hauerwas continues:

*"Resentment is another word for the unease that seems to grip good middle-class — mostly white — people who have worked hard all their lives and yet find that they are no better off than when they started. They deeply resent what they interpret as the special treatment that some receive in an effort to right the wrongs of the past. All this is happening at the same time as the Church — at least, the mainstream Church — is struggling against a culture of consumption. Americans find that they have no good reason for going to church. The statistical decline of Christians has led some church leaders to think that our primary job is to find ways to increase church membership. At a time when Christians are seeking to say something confident and useful about "church growth", what we communicate is superficial and simplistic. You do not need to come to church to be told that you need to be nice."*

Hauerwas concludes:

*If any people should know what it means to envision a good life, surely Christians should. And yet I do not think that we have emphasised enough why it is so important to live well, and, perhaps even more significantly, what living well looks like.*

What does living well look like? St Paul wrote to the Thessalonians "*Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right*" (3:13).

Recently someone gave me book of parsons quotations, including one by a man called Donald Hankey written in 1916:

*I asked a RC padre at the front once, what he would do if it was proved to him that there was no God. He replied that it would make no difference to his work at all. He would continue comforting the sick and bereaved, and giving the dying the assurance that there was one who loved them and that their living had not been in vain (Student in Arms, 1916).*

Donald Hankley was born in 1884, the son of a man who had made his money as sheep farmer in Australia before returning to England to raise a family. Hankey was commissioned in the Royal Garrison Artillery age 17 but illness on station in Mauritius meant he was cashiered out. Pondering his future he worked in slums, crammed an education, went to study at Oxford and returned to the slum parishes which also studying for the priesthood.. Unable to feel himself worthy he dressed as a labourer and travelled steerage class to Australia, earning his keep through labour, before returning to England in 1914 just short of his 30th birthday and enlisted as what was called "Kitchener's Mob" a gentleman ranker... quickly promoted to sergeant he gave up his stripes to move company because he was so disgusted by cruel and incompetent officers. He was wounded in 1915, recovered, commissioned into a new regiment and returned to France. He died on 12th October 1916, just over 100 years ago today. He wrote in a Letter to an Army Chaplain dated 17<sup>th</sup> April 1916

*The church is irrelevant if it focuses on the creeds. It only makes sense if it lifts people to God and the immortality of their souls. Therefore to be relevant it must be humble. One humble life is far more than any amount of cinema and buns.*

By cinema and buns he meant the things churches do to entice and entertain people. This realization was forged in the dug outs of trenches, not in our comfortable existence. It is said, there are no atheists on a battlefield, I wonder whether that is true. Sometime I wonder whether everyone is an atheist on a battlefield, because surely any moral scruple is suspended when the blood lust rises. But I am struck that Jesus Christ found more faith in a soldier than anywhere else in all Israel. Soldiers know about team work,

diligence, and duty. A recent book by a theologian called Luke Bretherton (*Hospitality as Holiness*, Ashgate 2010) which I've been pondering cites Individualism, Bureaucracy and Liberalism (where liberalism is a spirit of 'anything goes') as having corroded shared moral systems to the current pick and mix morality, and that this is what leads to conflict.

He writes, *"Human flourishing requires a certain kind of society, one whose common good takes account of human vulnerability and interdependence. "* (p.25)

He goes on to argue that in a world of parallel virtues, tolerance is a parody of Christian faith. Instead he argues we should practise hospitality, the over generous grace of God constantly open to the new insights of the Holy Spirit, rather than allow ourselves to be locked in tradition. but this requires a real engagement.... getting inside the lives of others , a proper humility....

At the PCC last week we affirmed the five marks of mission, two of which are proclaiming the good news and baptising and nurturing newcomers, and the other three are intrinsically hospitable where hospitality means putting yourself into the lives of other people: pastoral care, transforming unjust structures, care for creation...

And here's a thing, baptism, the ritual by which we become Christians, is immersion in water.... an act of humility... entering into the other... as today we enter into the commemoration of those who have died in war, we remember that this is the pattern exhibited by God in Jesus Christ who became one of us, entered our weakness, and set that as the pattern for us all to live by. That is hospitality, and that will be living well.