



Sermon preached by Revd Jeremy Caddick on 10th November 2024

Remembrance Sunday

Readings: 2 Samuel 11:1–7; Hebrews 9:24–28

**In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle ...** This is the nonchalant beginning of the story from the book of Kings about King David's adultery with Bathsheba. The war forms the background to the rather juicy tale of how David compasses the death of Uriah the Hittite so that he can have Bathsheba for himself. Powerful men behaving badly? Who'd have thought it? But what I'd like us to notice is the very casualness about the way the war is introduced. **In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle ...** It assumes that that is just what Kings do. War and fighting is part of life. On Remembrance Sunday that is indeed a question that we ask ourselves. Is war an inevitable part of human existence, or is there some way of breaking the cycle of violence?

A few minutes ago Elizabeth spoke with the children before they went off to their activities in the Hub. Now, I am sure that all the children here are absolute paragons of virtue and never ever quarrel, but I would like to draw your attention to a phenomenon that I can guarantee is playing itself out in Church Sunday Schools up and down the country. If you put two toddlers together in a room full of toys, despite the choice, they will each decide that they want to play with the same toy. Sooner or later there will be tears. This is a phenomenon that will be horribly familiar to all parents.

Now this is not just the perversity of the young. It is not that these quarrelling toddlers will grow up and learn to play nicely together like their Sunday School teachers are telling them they should. It is rather that that in these toddlers we are seeing something that is very important - and very worrying - about our fallen human condition, something that is plainly visible in infants before it becomes obscured by the veneer of socialisation.

The French philosopher René Girard looks at situations such as this and draws the lesson from it that we want things not because we decide for ourselves that they are intrinsically desirable, but because we see others wanting them. Desire is fundamentally about imitating others.

And what follows from that is that conflict is absolutely guaranteed. As we grow up and become more sophisticated it may be less blindingly obvious than in the case of quarrelling toddlers, but the dynamic is still at work. From it can be traced the roots of conflict and violence and war. From it can be traced the origins of alienation, as the other becomes not another person like me but a rival to be eliminated. So the roots of our problem go very deep indeed. Does that mean that war is inevitable?

One of the most powerful of the poems to emerge from the First World War is by Wilfred Owen, *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*. It is a retelling of the story of how Abram *nearly* sacrificed his only son Isaac, but then draws back at the last minute when an angel intervenes.

*So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,  
And took the fire with him, and a knife.  
And as they sojourned both of them together,  
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,  
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,  
But where the lamb for this burnt offering?  
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,  
And builded parapets and trenches there,  
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.  
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,*

*Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
A ram, caught in the thicket by its horns;  
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.  
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.  
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him. But the old man  
would not so ...*

Violence is an integral part of the sinfulness of the world, and war is an outworking of that sinfulness of a national, global scale. Our pride, our concern with our own desires and our own view of the world and of ourselves brings us inevitably into conflict with others. It is a deep part of our psychology as beings who *desire*, who *want* things. It is part of what drives us on, what makes us achieve, but part also of what inevitably leads us into conflict, when our will contests with that of others.

Viewed in that way war is always a product of human sin, always a manifestation of evil. We can respond to that insight by refusing to have anything to do with war, the pacifist position, or we can recognise that the sinfulness of war is but an extension of the sinfulness that we all wrestle with every day, and so approach it as always evil, but sometimes the least evil option, the so called just war position. Either way we recognise that violence is a fundamental part of the brokenness of the human condition.

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is read by Christians as prefiguring the death of Christ. The angel tells Abram not to kill his only son, because the God of love will offer *his* only son instead. In the letter to the Hebrews the sacrifice of Jesus is contrasted with the sacrifices of the temple, repeated endlessly because in the end they cannot answer the problem they are designed to address.

**For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.** (Hebrews 9.24-26)

One way of reading the practice of religious sacrifice is as a channelling of the violence that human rivalry and pride generates. The animal is the scapegoat. Pouring out our accumulated violence on some hapless goat or sheep relieves the pressure of our pent up feelings, but it can only ever do so temporarily. The constant workings of desire mean that we will soon be looking for another victim. Killing one animal is never enough. We need to carry on doing it again and again to make the whole diabolical magic work, or, more accurately, to distract ourselves from the awkward truth that it can never work. The problem of envy and aggression and war doesn't go away.

The sacrifice of Christ ends this ghastly cycle of violence because the incarnate Son of God is the only one who can absorb all the hatred and not be overwhelmed. He is the scapegoat we cannot obliterate with our hatred. Even the worst that sinful humans can inflict on him cannot extinguish the power of love and the force of life in Him. God's love is big enough to exhaust all our hatred and so he is the only one who can bring true peace.

So war is inevitable only in a world that does not know, does not *truly* know, the gift of God in Christ.

*Jeremy Caddick*  
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