DOWNING PLACE URC

Sermon preached by Dr Augur Pearce on Sunday 8 November 2020

1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18; Revelation 7:9-17

Lord, open your Word to our hearts, and our hearts to your Word. **Amen**.

Remembrance Sunday raises several questions for the preacher. One is whether we should be observing it in church at all. Then one could ask what is to be said about the fallen, that cannot be said about anybody who has died. And then there are the many questions about war – why does God allow it? when are Christians justified in participating in it? how are we to treat the wartime enemy? or what are the lessons to be learned when a war is over?

This is only the second time I have found myself asked to preach on the second Sunday in November. I could not cover all the issues the first time, and I don't intend to try now. But we find ourselves – the whole kingdom finds itself – in a time of crisis which has several times been compared to the major wars of the twentieth century because of the disruption it has brought to our common life and to individual lives. The pandemic causing it also suggests parallels to the disease, then called 'Spanish 'flu', which raged in the later years of the First World War, quite possibly influenced its outcome, and continued to take its toll of lives well after the Armistice of November 2018. So it seems to me that, as we listen for a word from God in today's situation, that questions of war and remembrance are likely to be a fruitful ground for at least some ideas on which we might usefully reflect. I offer some thoughts on two themes.

First, there is that 'church and state' question. Should we be observing Remembrance Sunday here in church at all? It could be seen as ironic that, whereas the nineteenth century saw so many aspects of national and local life secularised – the administration of justice in important areas transferred from ecclesiastical to secular courts, public cemetery provision outstripping the provision of churchyards, marriage solemnization before public registrars with no overt religious accompaniment, the university and colleges in this very city ceasing to place worship at the centre of academic life – the twentieth should find an originally secular national occasion moving into the churches in quite the way that it did.

For the silence of Armistice Day was originally quite secular. It was observed on the 11 November, the day when the guns fell silent, on whatever day of the week that might fall. The majority of war memorials were built in town squares and on village greens. Ministers of religion attended the November commemorations but did not lead them as of right: the civic dignitaries and military presence were just as symbolic. The *nation* mourned; the *nation* remembered; the *nation* expressed its resolution to do better. And silence, of course, is an inclusive medium, allowing everybody – believer or non-believer – to think the thoughts or pray the prayers they wish.

Nevertheless, it has always been a habit of the Christian church to muscle in on popular observances, believing God is sovereign over every area of human life. Our calendar is one example of this, fixing Christmas on the day of a pagan feast to lend a new focus to accustomed practices. Another is our harvest festival (and, for that matter, the holy days of Judaism and other

religions) which encourage the population to direct their gratitude for nature's food supply to its divine originator.

The origin of Remembrance Sunday was itself a very secular consideration. The wartime government of the 1940s did not wish to see two minutes' cessation of all activity disrupting the important work of production. The silence was therefore moved back to the nearest Sunday for the war's duration. When that war ended, the coincidence that 11 November 1945 fell on a Sunday gave everyone a breathing space to decide on a future policy. So it was really only in 1946 that, following a suggestion from Cardinal Griffin, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, the Sunday observance (placing the silence, for many, during the churches' morning worship) became a deliberate choice.

Not everyone in our churches welcomed the 'parade' aspect of that day, the presence and prominence of dignitaries who attended from duty and were not seen in the church building again for twelve months. But in its favour is our conviction that we have a mission to the world, secular or pagan though it might be. That is not crudely a mission to 'convert', but a mission to spread the knowledge of God's love as we have known it in Christ, by whatever means we can. To stand alongside those who have lost friends and family, or limbs, or mental health, in battle, and to let them know that Christians care - and why. To let the nation know that the servants of the King of kings, by whom earthly rulers reign, are willing to be partners in the business of society, which entails public decision-making but also reflection and learning the lessons of history. To show that a proper appreciation of what has been won for us in the struggles of the past does not have to be an orgy of nationalism or a glorification of war.

Since the 1990s, the observance of two minutes' silence on 11 November has resumed alongside, rather than replacing, the Remembrance Sunday service. Some have seen this as restoring a national occasion to the whole nation, which – by no means wholly Christian today - could not comfortably have joined together in a Christian context. For us, perhaps, this is a reminder that much of our own mission is to be accomplished outside the church building and not within it. But in the churches' defence it must be said that we only ever offered an *opportunity* to connect remembrance with worship; never compulsion. And that is still what we do. Our faith offers meaning and purpose, comfort and solidarity. Other faiths doubtless do likewise. That is still something that today's world may take or leave; but our experience suggests there is great advantage in taking it.

The second theme of Remembrance that I should like to speak about this morning is suggested by our two last readings from Scripture, which both focus on the afterlife. In one, Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica and answers its concerns regarding fellow-believers who had died before Christ's return, which they then believed to be imminent. In the other, written maybe forty years later, somebody called John addresses various churches in Asia Minor which, though not necessarily under persecution, were certainly under pressure to conform to the society around them with its climate of injustice; and in picturesque language he sketches the reward awaiting those who come through 'the great ordeal'. I believe these two passages are worth considering for what they tell us, or don't tell us, regarding the fallen in war, and the place of struggle for the right.

What they *don't* tell us, I suggest, is that the wartime dead have received the palm of martyrdom. That identification of giving one's life for King and Country with giving it for the Christian faith is the sort of reasoning one might have expected at the beginning of the First World War, but certainly not by the end of it. The toll in lives and the awfulness of the trenches caused a radical rethinking of earlier assumptions. People came to think that the human race still had much to learn; perhaps its story had not been one of consistent upward progress. Perhaps the clergy didn't

always know best. Most could see that war was, after all, neither exciting nor glorious. And many of those who had fought had not been spurred onto the barbed wire by loyalty to monarchs of whom they knew little, gratitude to countries which had never done much for them, or even a clear understanding of the politics underlying the conflict; but rather by more earthy convictions of what was right, defending their homes and a feeling they could not let their mates down.

What the passages *do* tell us, though, albeit in the language of a long-forgotten world view of 'meeting in the air' and 'heavenly courts', is that there is benefit in challenging injustice. We live in a world of much inequality and inhumanity, of terrorism and prejudice, of Brexit and covid-19, and meet after an American election which, whatever else it may have done, has underlined the deep gulf dividing western society.

There is a calling there to struggle: to challenge what is wrong and stand up for what is right. And what is right remains right, even when it shows no sign of prevailing; when destruction or disease shake our civilisations, when dictators take a firmer grip on power or democracy appears not to work as it should. To be in a minority, John tells us in Revelation, is no reason to be discouraged.

But we can fight the good fight without physical weapons, and consider it well fought even if our lives are not at risk. The church in Thessalonica was a minority, but it was not persecuted. Paul's promise that the risen faithful would 'be with the Lord forever' applied to them just as much as to John's multitudes 'before the throne of God … day and night'. Those who did fight with physical weapons, and often died in that fight – and this is perhaps particularly true of the Second World War – preserved for us a freedom to exercise political choices, to resort to independent courts, to share our convictions honestly with others. So whether we work for charities or assist in pastoral support, whether we devote our careers to serving society or just make responsible choices in what we buy, whether we write to newspapers, or teach the lessons of history or impart our values to children and grandchildren, we can all make good use of our freedom and stand for alternatives to injustice. The 'dead in Christ' of whom Paul spoke surely included many who had done no more than that. It was their faith which marked them out as such; though that faith found expression then, and should equally be expressed now, in work to further the realisation of Christ's kingdom. Amen.