



**Remembrance Day: Sermon preached by Revd David Tatem
on 14th November 2021**

Readings: Daniel 12: 1-13; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

In the cemetery of the small Dutch town of Ijsselmuiden my parents in law are buried. My mother-in-law died just before the first lockdown of the pandemic so it's not been easy to get to visit the grave but we have made been able to visit twice, the last time in August and I notice that nearby in the next row of graves, neighbours you might say, there are four graves of the Commonwealth war graves commission in the familiar white stone and as ever the area beautifully and meticulously maintained. They were new Zealand airmen, only one of them has a name, the other three do not and they died towards the end of the war when the liberation was near and as I stood there I remembered the stories my father in law had told of the war when as a young boy he had hid in a large hole dug under the kennel of a large and vicious dog every time there was a 'Razzia', a sweep across an area by German soldiers looking for young men like him who could be taken off to work in munitions factories in Germany ... which in turn made me remember the contrasting stories of my mother who had been in the wrens and had spent a large part of the war based at Kingswear near Dartmouth organising dinner parties for senior Free French officers and dining sometimes on caviar and as I stood there looking at the four graves in front of me I knew of course that I did not know their stories and certainly never knew them and wondered about his strange act of remembering which has become part of our cultural heritage. I remember the stories my parents and in laws told and our children may remember the stories that I have told them of the stories I was told and so it goes contributing to the cultures that surround our relationship with war and I use those last words carefully because from that point onwards divergences begin. Differences emerge around what happens to those memories and stories and what is done with them.

There are many who have come home from war so appalled and traumatised by what they have seen and experienced that they have never spoken about it even to their closest loved ones and still others have come with stories of valour and excitement and 'derring do' and films have been made and books written and whether deliberately or inadvertently they have contributed to what we might perhaps call a culture of war although it is dangerous to be over simplistic it's even helped us to move into the realms of the not yet by helping to generate films such as star wars.

The psychologist James Hillman wrote a book back in the 2004 entitled 'A terrible love of war' in which he suggested that the place of war and the acts of war are deeply embedded in what it means to be human. It's a complex and disturbing book and for many it's highly controversial perhaps but it does as they say, make you think, because it's clear that as a race we have a very deep intertwined relationship with war. And the nature of war is constantly changing and putting out new tendrils into our lives, whether it be the use of drones and the possibility of artificial intelligence deciding who and when to kill or the war that goes on in cyberspace. We now also have this new focus on culture wars and so it goes on.

The last section of Hillman's book is titled, 'Religion is war' which is, of course, particularly challenging and in it he asked the question of why Christianity, based on following someone who preached love and taught love of enemies, became so militaristic. Martin Henninger and David Pickering's grandfathers fought in the first world war, on opposite sides and you can see in that fact the force of Hillman's comment how ever could that have been possible if Christianity was achieving what it was supposed to achieve?

The reality is, though, that not only the history of the church but the history of the Jewish people right back to its beginnings has been intertwined with wars and a culture of war that we can see clearly in the Old Testament and the New. The book of Daniel comes from such a period, around 165 BC when the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes is threatening to destroy Jewish worship in the temple and the passage we heard read, close to the end of the book is one that looks forward to an end time when the victory of God is anticipated, so in a sense it belongs to the culture of war declaring that God will win in the end; but perhaps it already hints at something beyond that because the imagery it uses actually transcends national boundaries and speaks about the future of the righteous and not so much in terms of victory but in terms of the transforming of the way the world is. A better passage for today might actually be the one from Isaiah which is taken up by the book of revelation

Isaiah 65.17

“See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.

In the book of Revelation it becomes

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

In the Bible we find not simply the idea that our God will win in the end, because that kind of view is still part of the war culture, rather that there is a principle at work that declares not only that any particular war will end but that wars will end and that a culture of Peace will, in the end subvert and convert and transform the world and we are required to be in league with that not because we are commanded to be but because as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, once again borrowing from the Old Testament and paraphrasing it slightly; Gods laws are written in our hearts, they are written on our minds,”

The law when it was given was not just given to individuals but to a society in order to create a culture intended eventually to not a culture of simple obedience but one of

understanding and will and Jesus takes that to its ultimate expression so that the culture of the followers of Jesus is to be the culture that subverts and converts any culture that is in the end destructive of life. 'You are the salt of the earth' Jesus tells his listeners in the sermon on the mount. But he has no illusions about how easy that will be or perhaps how long it will take. In that passage from Mark he is speaking both about the immediate situation but also picking up the kind of end time imagery that his listeners would be familiar with but uses this perhaps unlikely and intriguing imagery of the birth pangs. It contains the suggestion that when things seem to be at their worst then something new, some new life, is in the process of emerging. As the old culture crumbles away, with all the pain and chaos that goes with that something new is waiting and ready to come to life.

It's by no means an easy or comfortable image because it is not done for us or to us but through us.

Which brings me briefly to make some connections with the COP26 conference and the issues that it has been engaged with. There are many connections that could be made, for example with the realisation of the immense damage the industries and conduct of war has made to the environment and to the lives of people the world over. Or with the way in which some participants have engaged with one another as opponents and aggressors posturing towards one another with hidden agendas. Perhaps the best connection, however, is with the way in which so many of those who have made their voices heard in Glasgow, especially the many, many young people, are engaged in nothing less than trying to subvert an old culture that is so closely allied to a culture of war and bring into being a new culture of Peace in the fullest sense of the word; one that is about mutuality and care for the total interdependence of all life and the need to walk gently; not to march any more in military lockstep but to dance in a celebration of life in all its fullness.

As we remember the past let us also work and pray, in hope, for the future.

Amen