

Revd. Simon Lewis
Isolation Radio Talk

Sunday 4 October
Remembrance Sunday
Wisdom of Solomon 6.12-16;
Matthew 25.1-13

There is no retirement from the service of God or from the struggle to bring in God's reign of peace upon earth

Good Morning to you all on this Remembrance Sunday

If any of you have never made a pilgrimage to your Cathedral in Wells, you really should. It is a place of grandeur; a sermon in stone; it refreshes deep places in any who will walk softly; talk quietly; think deeply. It is a place of indefinable *Presence* to the sensitive spirit; a thin place; so thin you may almost, but not quite, see from this world into the next.

Soon your Cathedral will be 900 years old, though the Cathedral Choir is even older – in the Minster Church, which the present Cathedral replaced, a school was founded and the choir began; their voices have praised God for over a thousand years and praise God still. Only twice in all that time has the Cathedral closed its doors; in the 13th century on the orders of King John, and, this year, when the Covid-19 pandemic swept the world. Like our churches here, in Ubley, Compton Martin and Ubley, it is open again.

Your Cathedral has also felt the pain and anguish that follows the unleashing of the dogs of war. Most intensely it knew that, in the darkest of all wars – a civil war; such wars are well known in our own time; they lie alongside the great conflicts of two World Wars we remember today.

350 years have passed when, in the time of Oliver Cromwell, the Cathedral fabric itself was brutalised and still bears the marks to this day. More devastation came in the Monmouth rebellion that followed. The cloisters then were used as a prison for the wounded and captured. If you happen to find yourself there, in the silence and intensity say, of a dark November evening, you might imagine hearing the cries of the wounded and the condemned as they lay in the cold and dirt of the straw-covered flagstones on the floor.

In Wells, one day Judge Jeffries condemned 300 to death and 500 to deportation; one can brood on the bleakness of those times so long ago. We cannot enter them of course. Or can we?

The Bishop of those days was a holy and saintly man remembered in the records of those times as one who brought comfort to the condemned and dying; he visited them, fed them, cared for them; he prayed with them. His legacy and his remembrance are deep within our collective spiritual memory in two hymns he wrote; we sing them still.

Awake my soul and with the sun,
thy daily stage of duty run;
shake off dull sloth and joyful rise
to pay thy morning sacrifice.

What touches your soul even more comes in the evening:

Glory to thee, my God this night
for all the blessings of the light;
keep me, O keep me King of Kings,
beneath thine own almighty wings.

Events so long ago cannot be part of real recollection. None of you, listening to me, has any recollection of the war that gave rise to the very idea of Remembrance Sunday. Only a very few will have memory of the war that began in 1939. Some of you, young or old, may wonder what this day is all about; you may feel, obliged by the pressure of popular culture, to wear a poppy for fear of being accused of 'not caring'. You may wonder too if, as they look at what the world has become, the dead you honour would so willingly die today.

You see, day by day, before your eyes, war still claims victims among combatants and civilians alike; old and young. A moving memorial to the dead, is in a little museum, beside a cemetery near Leningrad. There, you see the tragically matter-of-fact diary written by Tanya, young girl, describing her life during the siege. She records, one by one, by date and time, her family dying of starvation and she survived only long enough to make the long icy journey to safety; then to die. Such sights are seen still, but alas, sanitised for our daily consumption on television and on-line.

You know war is ugly, yet the question remains; is it the lesser of two evils? If a nation or a people are in the grip of a regime that sets at nothing the liberty, the dignity, the life of all who stand in its way; when diplomacy has failed, is war then justified? History would answer a cautious yes; part of the Christian answer to the eternal riddle of evil, is that great afflictions call forth great virtues and great courage and great sacrifice. It is those we remember today. There is a proper pride saying, 'Those people belong to us and we are glad of it'. They show what humanity can achieve. They direct our hearts towards peace.

On a final journey today, I take you to the City of Coventry, where reconciliation is powerfully experienced. The charred ruins of the burnt-out Cathedral stand side-by-side with the new Cathedral; what moves visitors most, is the simple cross of nails amid the ruins and the simple words – 'Father forgive'. This dents the lazy cynicism of today to a nation in danger of not knowing its past and caring less. A victory 75 or a 102 or 2000 years ago, does not destroy the world's evil. Each generation must recognise and resist fresh evil. There is no retirement from the service of God or from the struggle to bring in God's reign of peace upon earth.

Nation still struggles to dominate nation; old hatreds linger on; the capacity for destruction is beyond belief. Will the history of our generation tell a different story? War has not ceased; it looms on the horizon, a menace, and a challenge, to all who would take up the baton of leadership in a changing, bewildering, frightening world.

On this day, in the heart of every Christian there will be thanksgiving, penitence and above all, hope – yes, especially hope. That hope is in God through Jesus Christ, who walked this earth, and to whom you will return. God's praise was sung in dark times those many years ago, here also in Ubley, Compton Martin and Blagdon; certainly, in your Cathedral in Wells and by saintly Bishop Ken.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
praise him all creatures here below,
praise him above you Heavenly host,
praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost

Thank you for listening

Prayer

Why, I asked myself, would I not use again the Prayer of St Francis. It epitomises all that I have said. It is the perfect prayer for peace.

But this week I pray it in the singular - and I hope you make it your prayer too.

Let us pray

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that I receive;
it is in pardoning that I am pardoned;
and it is in dying that I am born to eternal life.
Amen.

[St. Francis (1181-1226)]