Remembrance Sunday Sermon by The Rev’d Graham Earney

November is our month of Remembrance. We started on the 1st when we had All Saints’ Day. The time when we remember all those who have been leading lights in Christian history through the centuries – although we honoured the festival the previous day at the Group Service. November 2nd saw All Souls Day when we call to mind all faithful members of the church who have kept the flame of faith alive through the generations.  November 5th commemorated a failed attempt to blow up parliament – literally; “Remember, remember the fifth of November, gunpowder, treason and plot”. Then on the 11th at 11.00am people came to a stop to remember the point when the guns fell silent at the end of the 1st World War.

And here we are at church on Remembrance Sunday. In preparing these words I am conscious that our observance differs from place to place. In some of our churches the war memorial is part of the building. In one of the churches you will have come in from the memorial at the Lytch gate. In another you are about to go out to the memorial in the middle of the village. And, some of us will hear this at the Zoom service this afternoon, including myself, who for differing reasons have been unable to be at any of the memorials personally.

I’ve been involved with taking part in Remembrance Sunday services for parts of the last six decades. My overall impression of them is how varied the weather has been. By and large the weather has been kind, if cold, to those who have been marching. However, I do recall one year being in a remote village in the hills of County Durham on a particularly bad day. The organisers were adamant that the whole ceremony had to be done at the war memorial. So we set out to march from the church to the memorial into the teeth of a howling easterly gale, with the rain driven almost horizontal! We were soaked before we got half way there – but get there we did and due ceremony took place before we retreated into the dry. I think I recall one man saying that now he understood how it had felt for those unlucky enough to be on the Arctic convoys!

I must confess that as someone born just before the end of World War 2 and therefore just too young to have done national service I have always been worried about preaching on Remembrance Sunday. In the early days – to many in the congregation who had been in the trenches of Flanders. When on Tyneside it was the association with the sea – the number of people who had lost family members to enemy action. When I worked for the Missions to Seafarers in the 1960s it was said that there was no street in the then South Shields that had not lost someone to torpedo or sea mine. What do you say of value to those who have been through the experience when you, yourself, have not?

I found this most challenging when I was Social Responsibility Officer for the diocese of Bath & Wells. I was ‘wheeled out’ to give the Christian Responsibility view of Remembrance. I remember on one occasion preaching about war being the last resort and how difficult it was to apply the Christian principles of the Just War now that weaponry had become so powerful and widespread in its effects. At the end of the service, as we walked down the centre aisle, the incumbent turned to me and whispered, “now we’ll see what the General thought of that”. As he left the General thanked me for my thoughtful sermon and said he agreed with everything I had said. The incumbent was amazed by this and indicated that he thought the General would have been against my thoughts. To his surprise the General said, “Rector, you didn’t think I enjoyed war, did you!”

This little cameo depicts for me what I think the centre point of our Remembrance Sunday observance should be. We come to honour the part played by others in war. Particularly we remember with gratitude all those who have died or been injured in the two world wars and the various conflicts which have taken place since. They found themselves in places which thankfully we have been spared. They gave their lives that we might have the chance of peace. I count myself blessed in that I have not lost a relative in conflict. However, my paternal grandfather was invalided out having peen gassed in World War 1. I know how blighted his life was, both physically and emotionally, as a result. Each time we look at names on war memorials we need to look beyond those names to all who were affected by the deaths recorded.

If that is looking back we need to use the cameo to look forward. Just as they sacrificed their lives in the past we need to sacrifice ours in the cause of peace today and into the future. We need to lead peaceable lives. Lives devoted to bring peace and reconciliation to our relationships, to our community, and to the way in which we view the world. Peace should dictate the way in which we respond with generosity towards the needs of those we meet and those across the globe whom we will never meet.

So, how do we combine these thoughts of thankfulness for what others have done in the past and thoughts of aspiration about what we can do in the present and the future. By listening to, and putting into practice, the words of Jesus to his disciples as recorded in the gospel of John. We need to love one another in a similar way to that in which Jesus is loved by God and the way he loves the Father. This is no ‘wishy-washy’ love. This love is about mutual respect and trust. It’s about keeping faith with the things of God. It is love which leads people to give their all for others, their friends, their comrades, and, yes, even those they cannot know. “Greater love has no one than this, that a person lay down their life for their friends.”

Or put another way: we might do well to carry round with us the words of the Collect for last Sunday;

God, our refuge and strength,

bring near the day when wars shall cease

and poverty and pain shall end,

that earth may know the peace of heaven

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Rev’d Graham Earney