

WHEN WILL WE EVER LEARN

PREACHER : Canon Neil Thompson, Precentor

Sunday, November 8th 2009

Remembrance Sunday

10.50am

Rochester Cathedral

When will we ever learn? When will we ever learn?

So ends the Pete Seegar song, *Where have all the flowers gone*.
Its first performance was in 1962 at a UNICEF concert by Marlene Dietrich.

And it was sung more recently at Harry Patch's Funeral in Wells Cathedral on August 9th this year; he was the last surviving soldier from the First World War.

The song speaks of the futility and vicious circle of war and it was inspired by a Cossack song quoted by Mikhail Sholokhov in his novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* published in 1934 and written in the crucible of Stalin's Great Terror.

On Remembrance Sunday this may seem a little suspect to some of you as in the 60's it was associated with the protest songs of the Vietnam War.

But in fact it says something profoundly true: there is not only sorrow and tragedy in the never-ending killing of warfare but also something tantamount to resignation and acceptance, born of helplessness.

The world today still suffers from helplessness in spite of our remembrance.

On this Remembrance Sunday our thoughts are filled not only with the extraordinary cost of the two great world wars but also by the weekly stream of coffins coming back from Afghanistan through RAF Lyneham and through the streets of Wooten Bassett.

When will we ever learn?

Despite the enormous and breathtaking breakthroughs on technology and the advance of material wealth and comfort over the past hundred years, war and its terrible cost is still an everyday fact.

Tragically, since the end of the Second World War, British soldiers have been killed in action every year except in 1968.

And the past week has seen more young men slain in Afghanistan bringing the total to 94 dead this year and 231 since Britain's first involvement in 2001.

Is remembering enough?

The answer is no.

However important it is to remember and honour the fallen and to care for the wounded and their dependents, making peace is just as critical.

Yet it seems that human beings just do not have what it takes to live at peace with one another and to uphold truth, justice, mercy and compassion.

Day by day, human rights are crushed across the face of the earth and it is easy for each of us to become resigned if the suffering and affliction is far enough away.

For God, this is unthinkable.

So even on this Remembrance Sunday we must face the truth that remembering alone is not enough. Yes, it is important but only if it allows the transforming power of God's humility and love to reign in our world ...and sadly there is little evidence of that.

So how can it be any different if we have failed up until now?

The answer lies with our vision and willingness to allow God to change us and inspire us.

We need faith.

Faith is not wishful thinking.

Faith is that commitment to the unseen world of love.

Faith opens us up to a reality that makes meaning eternal and gives purpose to the contradictions and incomprehensible nothingness of suffering and tragedy.

And that commitment of faith must spill out into the risk and practicality of action.

Faith is not synonymous with organised and established religion.

Faith is dangerous and risky not only for the individual but for human society in every age.

Faith is about God's change and his involvement and commitment with his world.

It is about that transformation that involves the human personality at depth and the values and trust that forge relationships in human society.

Our reading from Isaiah speaks of this transformation.

Here is a vision of God's rule and justice ...and it comes into our lives, our personal lives and our public life, our private intimate world and the arena of politics and economics - by grace, an unmerited power and gift that changes us from the inside and makes us capable of forgiveness, mercy and compassion.

It is only when we live by this power of love, the power of God, that lasting peace and justice can exist.

Now the vision of Isaiah and the reality of God's love in Christ lie at the heart of western civilisation and values.

This is what men and women have fought and died for – that we might be free, truly free, in a society formed by self-giving, self-sacrificing love and the freedom that comes from that love.

Those whom we remember today did not die in vain if we are willing to engage in faith and hope and love.

We all come to this day and this moment from somewhere unique and different, yet there is something too which unites us – the immeasurable sacrifice of so many others and the dignity of those who have suffered and died for the cause of true peace.

It is faith and the power of God which will take us beyond merely our resistance to tyranny to building a world where each and every soul is valued and truly cared for.

But it takes more than government policies; it takes faith.

Scatched onto the wall of a cell by a Jewish prisoner in Cologne were these words:

*I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.
I believe in love even when I cannot feel it.
I believe in God, even when he is silent.*

Here is faith.

And for you and me it challenges us anew this morning, here in this cathedral.

Can we do more than just remember?

Can we lift our lives as gift to God and to one another in a new way?

That is what the prophet Isaiah dreamed of and which God in Jesus invites us to do.

Flowers will continue to be picked and given in love by men and women – and all that hope will be dashed by the pointlessness of war if we cannot to learn to live by faith.

When will we ever learn?

The answer lies with each and every one of us and our common demand on the world around us to live a different way.

That different way is to live in the power of the living God who transforms our existence into living, and our bloody history into the unending freedom of true peace.

This is the battle that has to be fought: the battle of our wills and the conflict of our self-interest.

Teach us, good Lord,
to serve Thee as Thou deservest,
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to ask for any reward
save that of knowing we do Thy will.
In Jesus' name we pray.

(Ignatius of Loyola 1491 - 1556)

Amen.