

Remembrance Sunday 2022

Exeter Cathedral

Sunday 13 November 2010

Micah 4.1-5

In the myth of human progress, it is easy to indulge the fantasy that things are getting better and better. Here we are (so we like to think) set full-square on the escalator of scientific, economic and intellectual progress. In part this is true, at least for those of us in the West. The trouble is not everyone in the world shares equitably in the benefits of progress, and inequity breeds grievance, and grievance generates conflict.

We are seeing this at the moment in the discussions at COP27 with the poorer nations complaining about the way they are being disproportionately affected by climate change caused by richer, industrial nations.

Remembrance Sunday holds up a mirror to society. It confronts us with the painful reality about what happens when things go wrong in the world. It alerts us not simply to the 'pity of war', as the poet Wilfrid Owen had it, but to its origins in hatred and unaddressed grievances.

Today we remember with thanksgiving the millions who died in defence of the freedoms we enjoy. We remember those who have been maimed or disabled, and those whose traumatic experience of conflict continues to haunt their waking hours. We remember above all those who paid the ultimate sacrifice with their lives. We honour their courage and bravery, but we also reflect on the continuing struggle for justice, freedom and human dignity.

Here in Devon, as elsewhere in the UK, we are sheltering hundreds of Ukrainian refugees and we hear their traumatic stories. British troops are returning on leave from Estonia, and our seamen and submariners from patrolling the waters around Taiwan lest China should invade. We hear their stories too.

It is rare for a news bulletin not to have some reference to the latest atrocity. The words of Jesus ring in our ears: 'You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but the end is not yet' (Mt 24:6).

Violence is a fault-line running through humanity and historically no religion has been free of it. One of the scandals of the Church is that so many persecutions have taken place in the name of Jesus Christ. It's not many years ago that there were photographs of bishops blessing tanks. But as Niall Ferguson's points out in his book, *The War of the World*, in the last century secular dictators and their atheistic ideologies caused the death of more people than in the whole history of the world.

Between them, Stalin and Hitler accounted for the death of between 58 and 59 million people, and Mao Zedong several tens of millions. The arithmetic of death is mind-blowing. During the twentieth century, Ferguson estimates that wars killed between 167 and 188 million people. It is why, he says, the last century will go down in the annals of history, not as the era of scientific progress as we like to think, but as the era of wars.

The shadows created by fear and violence continue to fall across our lives and, thanks to the bravery of journalists and modern technology, we find ourselves armchair spectators of every battle and skirmish. In the face of relentless exposure to human tragedy, it is tempting to switch off and retreat into a private world. It is easy to forget the resolutions made in blood that never again would we permit the slaughter and destruction of wars that ravaged our world.

Which is why today's annual act of remembrance is important. It challenges complacency and demands that we don't forget, that we don't look away, that we be vigilant.

I've never been to China, but I've always wanted to see the Great Wall of China and the famous Chinese Terracotta Army, the site of which was discovered by a peasant farmer when ploughing his field in 1974, and which fifty years on archaeologists are still excavating. So far, over 7,000 life-size warriors have been excavated from a vast burial complex in Shaanxi province. Each terracotta figure is different and spookily life-like, right down to the bows on a general's tunic and the braids of an archer's hair.

The figures were commissioned by Ying Zheng who came to the throne in 246 BC at the age of thirteen and immediately set about turning his

state into a war machine. His huge and disciplined army, equipped with superior weaponry, swiftly conquered larger neighbouring states and China was born. The first emperor, as he became known, was not noted for his modesty. He announced that henceforth he was to be called 'Supreme Ruler of the Universe'.

Much in the way that President Putin models himself on Peter the Great, President Xi Jinping hails Ying Zheng as a hero, the father of China. But what is extraordinary about the first Chinese emperor is that, in spite of his huge power, he was insecure and terrified of death. It was why he needed (or so he thought) an army to protect him in the underworld.

Today Ying Zheng is acknowledged as one of the most important figures in human history and I've no doubt that, with China increasingly flexing its political muscle on the international stage, we will be hearing his name more and more.

I'm pretty certain St Paul had never heard of China, let alone of Ying Zheng. He was much more worried about things nearer to home and the Roman Emperor playing at being God. Paul sees the judgement of God coming against those who rebel against the rule of God and, as he puts it in his Second Letter to the Thessalonians, those who 'exalt themselves above every so-called god or object of worship, and declare themselves to be God' (2 Thess. 2.4).

Emperor Ying Zheng was a ruthless, bloodthirsty tyrant who killed tens of thousands of people. He was also a compulsive builder of vast palaces who made long journeys throughout his kingdom ritually inscribing whole mountainsides with accounts of his achievements, cut into the rock. If we had the power and the money, what inscription would we want written down for posterity? I hope none of us will be carving words of wisdom on the rock escarpments of Dartmoor, but if we could choose, what epitaph would we want written on our tombstone? How would we wish to be remembered?

It is not unusual for leaders to want to leave a mark on the world, a legacy that will not be forgotten. It has driven pharaohs to build pyramids, monarchs to rise to the heights of architectural endeavour, and presidents to invade neighbouring states and annex their territory. Hitler, Stalin and that other Chinaman of our time, Mao Zedong, succeeded in leaving their mark on the world. President Putin seems keen to join their ranks.

Which makes the words of another great military leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, all the more extraordinary. He said: 'Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and I conquered the world by force, but Jesus Christ conquered the world by love and still today millions would gladly die for him'.

Jesus Christ taught that true greatness comes in a different way from that sought by the dictators who have raged across the landscape of history. Jesus said, 'Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' (Mark 10. 43-45)

He is not advocating enforced poverty or slavery. He is talking about freely choosing to use our money, our gifts, our influence, our time and energy in the service of others in a sacrificial way. According to the New Testament, true greatness is measured not by self-aggrandizement but by selfless generosity, by forgiving people and not nursing grudges; and of this Jesus Christ himself is the touchstone.

Today is a day for remembering and one of the purposes of our remembrance is to disinfect our minds of egoism. Self-centredness, even in the morally earnest, is a snare.

Most of us do not have the resources available to an emperor or a great leader to effect change. But that doesn't mean we are powerless. Our grave may not be marked by a terracotta army or a fancy tombstone. But a lasting memorial can be written on human hearts that have been transformed by love rather than damaged by power and violence.

By God's grace, if we choose, we can 'beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks'. Then, in the words of the prophet Micah, 'people shall sit under their own vines and fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid anymore' (Micah 4.3-4).

A disciple of Jesus Christ honours not the love of power, but the power of love. Let that be our epitaph.

+ Robert Exon