

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY

12th November 2017

Micah 6:6-8

Matthew 5:38-48

Remembrance Sunday is a challenge to all of us, or it should be. When we gather to remember those who have lost their lives in war, and those who were maimed, and those who had to grieve and whose lives were changed forever, and when we remember that this is not just in the past – although the roots of our ceremonies lie there – but continues in the present, we ought to be challenged. We are fortunate that few of us now have known the full horror of war, and it is right that we should honour those who have.

it is a challenge, and the words of Jesus which we read this morning reinforce that challenge. For every war that ever was, and especially every war that has been fought since the time of Jesus, by those who knew his words, has to be deemed as a failure. Many failed to gain the outcome that they sought, indeed all wars fail in this, if you look at it from the perspective of all sides that have been involved, all points of view, all aims. But that war has had to be fought at all – and sometimes, I agree, it seems that war has been unavoidable – but that a war could not be avoided, had to be fought, means that as human beings we have failed. We have failed to live up to the standards set for us by Jesus, the standards of loving, not only those who think like us, but those who do not.

Of course, Jesus sets us a very, you might think an impossibly high, standard. But then again, he knew what he was talking about. Jesus was not like the majority of us, not knowing what it is to really know who your enemy is, not knowing what it is like to live with the brutality of war or of its aftermath as your daily companion. He lived in a land which was overrun and ruled by the Romans. And before the Romans it was the Greeks and before the Greeks it was the Babylonians, and so on for five hundred years. Five hundred years! It was amazing that they still had a sense of themselves as a nation at all! Lots of other former nations no longer existed. It was their unique faith which bound them and linked them and gave them their identity.

But living under occupation meant that every time you stepped outside you might have an unpleasant encounter. You might not. There weren't so many Romans around that you would meet one every time, and they weren't always trying individually to grind you down – but they were trying to grind you down as a nation, and as a group of people who refused to identify as merely one more Roman province. They were trying to enforce regime change on you, and politically the process was almost complete. And the uncertainty of your daily life was part of that process. You never knew when you might have one of those overlords decide it was cold and seize your coat. You never knew when you might feel a hand on your shoulder and hear the demand that this was a heavy bit of kit, so why didn't you carry it for a mile or so? Never mind it that was taking you out of your way, never mind what you were trying to do or where you were trying to go yourself. And if you objected, or if you hesitated, yes, you might find that the same someone slapped your cheek.

Brutality is the way of the world to get and keep the upper hand. Brutality coupled with uncertainty works, as aggressors have known long before anyone analysed the psychology of it. But it is not the way of the God. It is never the ideal.

When Jesus wants to make his radical point, he quotes the Hebrew scriptures. Of course. That was what any good teacher did. You quote the scriptures and then you interpret them. But Jesus doesn't so much interpret them as overturn them. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." When this was given to the people of Israel as their guide and command, it was actually a step forward. For what is the natural, fallen, human reaction to being hurt? Is it not to hurt back *far more*. Someone elbows you and you shove them to the ground and then maybe kick them and so on. Horrible, but it happens, and it happened back before Moses gave the people the law. So, this eye for an eye thing was a way of limiting violence. You couldn't take more revenge than the offence which had been perpetrated. In its day this was radical and far-thinking. Even today, if it were strictly adhered to, instead of invoked to justify self-serving violence, it might be quite radical. But Jesus says it doesn't go far enough. It is about continuing imperfection. It is about grudges and hatred, and that is not the way that God wants us to live with each other in the world, because it is not how God lives with us.

God lives with us in giving and giving and giving. Jesus reminded his hearers that he gives the sun and the rain, the things that we need to sustain life, to the evil as well as to the righteous. God did not ask if we were worth it, if we would listen to him, if we would accept him when he gave us himself in Jesus. Which is just as well, because, as John tells us in the beginning of his gospel, Jesus "came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." If God had waited until we were ready to accept him, listen, follow, believe, and act, then he would be waiting still. But he loved us anyway and sent his Son. And Jesus his Son models this giving and giving, even in the face of violence. Jesus modelled what it can look like to love your enemies, as he forgave even those who put him on the cross. It is not until his resurrection that we see the power that there is in this love.

So when Jesus says, turn the other cheek and give your cloak and go two miles instead of one, he is talking about more than non-violent resistance. He is talking about the way of love. If someone inconveniences you, you don't fret about what you thought you should be doing, you take it as a chance to help someone else. You do it with a smile, and with love, which takes away the sting that the demand was intended to contain. Jesus is urging us to live wholly in his way of love, which always puts others first and our own considerations last. He is urging us to live in the perfection of God.

And yes, we fail. Every day we fail in our personal lives, and far too often we fail in our national life as well. Every time we exhibit resentment, never mind use force or go to war, we fail. So maybe we should just forget this, and go back to the Old Testament way of limited violence?

We might if there were any indication from the Old Testament narrative, or from the history of the Christianised world, that it worked. But if you are trying to lose weight, the best thing to do is not to have the biscuits, or chocolate, or cheese or whatever is your particular downfall even in the house, because knowing that they are there may make them harder to resist. In the same way it seems that if human beings know that even limited violence is a permissible reaction, they cannot resist going too far. Look at the violence recorded when the people took the land of Canaan – just read

the book of Judges. This was after this eye for eye law had been given them, but they could not stick to it. They went in for wholesale slaughter.

No, it is better to hold the ideal up to our eyes. It is better to remember Jesus' words about loving our enemies, and being perfect as God is perfect. Yes, then we will know that we fail, but it is better to know that, and be kept humble by the knowledge; it is better to know that and turn to God for forgiveness every day; it is better to know that and daily ask for the strength and chance to try again than to just ditch the knowledge, lower our sights and be less than we were made to be.

So today as we have stood/will stand by the war memorial and honour(ed) all those who died and who grieved and whose lives were changed for ever, we remember that wars arise out of a lack of love, out of us not mirroring God as we are called to. When things get to the point where it seems war must happen, that it is necessary – and things do get to that point, and so wars happen – it is because at some point, maybe way in the past, there has been pride instead of humility, there has been injustice done and allowed to rankle, there has been unkindness experienced which has been allowed to make people bitter.

Remembrance Sunday is a challenge to us, and so it should be. At the memorial it is right that we should reflect on the sacrifices made, voluntarily or involuntarily, by those who have suffered and died. But as we later reflect on our reflections, as we remember our time standing on what is to many holy ground, let us hold up Jesus' words to our own lives, as a mirror. And when we look honestly and see that we fail, let us remember that what is asked of us is to do justice – especially to those who have found life unfair – and to love kindness – not only to those who are kind to us, but especially to those who are not – and to walk humbly, which means truthfully, honestly with our God – our God who gives and gives, grieves and grieves, and loves and loves. Amen.

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