

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

Rev. Catherine Buchan

10th November 2019

Psalm 9:9-20

John 15:12-17

Every year when we gather at the war memorials, we use largely the same form of words to frame our act of remembrance. If someone hadn't been to such an act for ten years or so and turned up again today, they would find that little had changed. We will still pray for God's help, remember the sacrifices of war, hold silence for two minutes – I read somewhere that when the two minutes was first instituted the first minute was to remember those who fell in the Great War and the second minute to remember those who were made bereft by their deaths, the families at home. We still lay wreaths in solemnity and silence and commit ourselves to live our remembrance by the way we conduct our lives. Nothing has changed.

But every year it is different, because every year those of us who gather are in a different place in our lives. We have another year's experience under our belts, and that has changed us. And every year as a nation we are in a different place as well. In regard to the wars remembered on our memorials, we are another year further from them, and so we should have another year's perspective on these events. As the generation which knew the privations and dangers of war diminishes, so those of us – the majority – who know the two world wars only as history should be able to gain a wider perspective on what was really going on then: the whys and wherefores, the acts of horror and bravery on all sides of the conflict. Although as a nation we pause today, it should not be as an act of nationalism, of national pride and glory but simply of remembering.

And if we were to try to make our remembrance an act of national pride and glory, we have such scriptures as Psalm 9 to remind us of what folly that would be. The Psalm is honest – one of the delights of the book of Psalms is the honesty of their writers. This one is ascribed to David, but we are not told at what point in his eventful life it was composed. It is a Psalm about the judgement of God. David has seen his enemies routed and is full of praise to God. And yet all is not well with him. He is still suffering at the hands of those who hate him, though we are not told exactly what is wrong.

But that makes the Psalm the more powerful for us reading it, as we can put our own situations into the framework of this ancient prayer. In his anguish, David brings his complaint to God, asking for deliverance. When we know anguish, we can do the same.

So far, so straightforward. What is interesting is the burden of David's prayer when it comes to those who oppose him. He reminds us that the most powerful forces in the world, the acts of nations, are not as strong and powerful as they may seem. Whether it is nations who go to war, or nations which adopt unfair policies to their own people; whether it is nations which seek to dictate to other countries or which are corrupt from within – there are so many ways that the idea of national power can be abused – but in response to all of them, David's prayer is simple: "Let the nations know that they are only human."

Let the nations know that they are only human. Well, of course they are, but the reason for David's prayer is that he wants us all to know that there is a power far greater than any national but human power, which is the power of God. And the God has the power to judge the nations. A few weeks ago we thought about the judgement of God, and we saw that while yes, it does mean that God sees what is wrong and what is right – in individuals or in groups and societies - it is not a simple matter of God seeing and condemning and punishing. In fact the judgement of God is not so much a retributive justice as a restorative judgement, seeing what is wrong and putting it right. It is healing the wounds caused by the wrong and restoring humanity to its right and intended relationship with God and with one another, which is one of harmony and peace not of eternal one-up-man-ship and war.

This is why David is able to say that the Lord is a stronghold for those who are oppressed. This is why he is able to say that the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever. He is looking to God's restorative justice, to put things right, putting an end to power that is used for the wrong things – for personal gain and national expansion at the expense of care for those who most need it.

The challenge of the Psalm is twofold. The first is personal. There are times when we all feel as though we are powerless, that the national or international forces of the world are too much for us to stop or change, and that they are rolling over us regardless. It can happen when our we find ourselves unemployed and seeking a way forward in life. It can happen when we consider the vast challenges of the environmental disaster which we have brought upon the world. It can happen when the internal mechanisms of our politics leave us frustrated and bamboozled. This Psalm then reminds us that even when we feel like we are alone, God is

always there and able to transform the situation we find ourselves in. The Psalmist reminds the reader (in v10) that God never forsakes those who seek God, and so we are challenged in our understanding and in our journey of faith constantly to seek God, not only in the good places, but also in the challenges and difficult places of life.

The personal application of Scripture comes first, because even large groups and societies and nations and alliances of nations are made up of and led by individuals. But that does not mean that we can leave our faith by our bedside when we rise from our daily prayers (or wherever you like to go to pray). Faith is not merely a private matter, for God sees and has power over even the most powerful of human groupings. This is why our Psalm goes on (v15-20) to speak of the duty of the nations to ensure that they continue to seek the good of the people they are entrusted to care for and are reminded that as powerful as a nation-state may seem, there is still a power greater than that.

And just when we are thinking about the great, illimitable power of God, we come up against Jesus' words that we should love one another, even to the greatest love known, the love that leads a person to lay down his or her life for another. Sometimes these words are used to speak of the soldiers who died in conflict and who we remember today. This is not inappropriate, although not all who went chose to go and most who died did not choose to make that sacrifice either. But before we apply Jesus' words to anyone else, we should first of all apply them to himself. I am sure that this is what he meant us to do.

David has called on God to stand in judgement on the nations and remind them that they don't have all the power that they think they do. Jesus is going to show the way that God's power works by turning all human ideas of power on their heads and laying down his life for his friends. He is going to show the way that God looks on power by calling the men he has gone around with friends, not servants (nor disciples). Among friends, power and power-play has no place. And if we seek to follow Jesus, then we are called to that idea of love and friendship with all – with those who we find it easy to get one with and with those we don't. No one said that being a Christian was the easy way! But it is the way of love, which eschews power, which subverts human power by living in submission – to one another and supremely to God.

The irony of this, is that those who do live in Christ's way of love, those who do put their own interests aside and lay down their lives – in death or as living sacrifices of service and selflessness – are sometimes those who gain a transformative power in the world. They include those who were killed in active service or in passive horror during the great wars of last

century, whose deaths demand that we continue to listen to their silenced voices and learn from their history lest we end up repeating it. And of course they include Jesus of Nazareth, who knowingly allowed himself to go to death, rather than turn aside from teaching and showing God's way of love, and died with forgiveness for his executors on his lips.

Jesus' life and death and what happened afterwards teaches us that the way of self-giving in love, the way of submitting in love, the way of God, who gave his only son for the life of the world, is not, as it may seem, simply a way that gives up life, but also a way that feeds, enhances and renews life.

Today we will stand again by the war memorial in silence and in prayer. Today, maybe, you will read again the names of those whose lives and deaths are recorded there – not all by any means who gave their lives in war in and from this place or far from here. Today again we will join in mourning the loss and mourning our past. May we also join again in seeking to learn about sacrifice and death and love and life, and pledge ourselves to follow more surely in the way of the cross. Amen.