

SERMON FOR REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY | 12.11.2023

Wisdom 6: 1-10; I Timothy 2: 1-7; St Matthew 2: 13-20

In my little village just outside Cambridge in 1961/2, the red Eastern Counties double decker bus came each afternoon at about 3.30pm. I remember that because it was about the time I was walking home from school, past the bus stop at the top of Mingle Lane. And there she was, every day, in my memory at least, dressed in a big fur coat, waiting for someone to get off. And when I asked why she was waiting there every day, I heard the story: she was waiting for her son to come home from the war. And of course he never did. And she would go home – and come back the next day, just in case... What pain she carried.

And that is just the tiniest fragment of just one war, the second world war, one tiny story of the millions that could be – and are – told, the tragedies of war and the loss felt by the bereaved. As we will say later in our liturgy: *So long as we live they too shall live, for they are a part of us – and we will remember them...*

But our reading from Wisdom 6 today takes us in a different direction. In this modern version we hear: *Listen you politicians and understand; learn, you judges and diplomats. Pay attention, you who rule over peoples and nations. For your authority was given to you by the Lord, and your mandate by the God of Heaven. He will scrutinise your intentions and inquire into all your plans. And if it should be found that, as servants of his kingdom, that you did not rule rightly, keep the law or walk according to the purpose of God, he will come down upon you with devastating force; his judgement against you will be terrible and swift. For the lowliest may be pardoned in mercy, but those who have high office will be held accountable for all their misdeeds.*

And my mind flipped to Riyadh and to the emergency meeting of Arab and Muslim states discussing the situation in Gaza. And they rightly talked about aid for the Palestinians still caught in the crossfire, the lack of medical supplies and fuel for generators. And I watched on TV the faces of the protestors in London watching the huge pro-Palestinian march. And I could not but help feeling the sheer, physical hatred to be found in those places: in one, for the Jews, and in the other for the Palestinians. Naked hate.

This depth of antipathy for others is, of course, what lies at the root of every war. Whatever conflict we look at there, somewhere are people stirring up a visceral loathing for other human beings so deep that nothing they hear will persuade them to change their minds: the Germans for the Jews, the Americans for the Viet Cong, the Unionists for the Republicans.

What in heaven's name could make it possible for Hamas to do what they did to those young fans at a pop festival on 7th October? Had they lost any sense that these were people with loved ones and with futures to look forward to? What kind of blindness overtook these terrorists?

Our Gospel reminds us that this is nothing new. Herod's troops did exactly the same after the birth of Jesus. The massacre of the innocents as we now call it gets repeated year in and year out, fuelled by this madness, by this hate. Nothing we can think of can possibly excuse what happened then or what is happening now.

But, Wisdom says, throwing our hands up in the air is not enough: our leaders have to tackle more than just raw emotion. They have to go beneath the surface and ask: how and why has this situation come about and how do we find an alternative way through so that young and old alike can live in peace?

In the current context, how can we find a way to honour both the Israeli and the Palestinian narratives? Wasn't the Israeli blockade of Gaza for sixteen years an almost guaranteed way of incubating the hatred of the two million Gazans? Wasn't the refusal of Hamas to talk at any level with the Israelis, refusing them the right to even exist, a way of ensuring that at some point an intifada would erupt? And in Riyadh and in New York, our political leaders find they have neither words nor vision to find a way out of this impasse.

We, this Remembrance Sunday, are called to do more than just weep. Somehow, far away as these things may appear to be, we have got to dig deep into ourselves and develop that true empathy for those suffering on both sides of this conflict – empathy with open ears. Every single Jew and Muslim locked in that tiny sliver of land is grieving, frightened and angry. There is no point in pitting one load of suffering against another. This is not some kind of 'Suffering Olympics'. Both communities are hurt to the very core of their being.

But as Christians we do have something to offer: the way of Christ. Jesus told us to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to pray for those who abuse and persecute us, knowing that is the only possible way out of this addictive cycle of tit for tat violence.

And it can be done. When the house of Dr Izzeldin Abuelaish, a Gazan doctor, was hit by missiles in 2012, he lost three daughters and a niece. And the name of his autobiography has wonderful echoes of Edith Cavell, executed for her part in caring for allied troops in occupied Belgium in 1915: *I shall not hate.*

This is our task this Remembrance Sunday. To flag up in every context we can the words of the Prince of Peace, to offer every encouragement to those who take the risk of breaking down the barriers between social, ethnic and political adversaries. We have to hold our leaders to account when they say the problems are impossible to solve, when what they mean is that they are unwilling to reach beyond the politics into the human situations of those who share the same humanity but from different backgrounds. *Set your hearts on my words, says the Lord, and at the last you will be rewarded.*

But that doesn't mean limply letting these matters wash over us. Over the years I have often been accused of being too passionate, too febrile in the face of wrong. I don't just let things go if I think there is an injustice. I admit I don't easily accept the advice of bishops and archdeacons who tell me I shouldn't get so involved! What drives me, what has always driven me, is that call to be able to see the difference between issues and the people who hold them. I may disagree entirely with the views that someone values, but that does not mean that one has to hate them as people! Jesus might have stormed into the Temple because the traders were abusing their customers, but that didn't stop him laying down his life for those very same people, a matter of days later.

The trouble with so much of our politics and indeed the running of so many of our institutions is that we find it almost impossible to work with people who aren't like us. The very act of holding a different opinion or using a different way of speaking seems to instantly erect all sorts of subtle (and not so subtle) kinds of barriers which nurture mistrust and social distance - the place where, sad to say, hatred can so easily flourish. It happens even in our churches, as I discovered here even amid the wonderful organ recital last night.

We cannot honour the dead of each and every war and still hold resentments and animosities from the past. It was for the breaking down of these things that they died. Nor can we honour the dead by refusing to go into no man's land and reach out to those who are different. *As Wisdom teaches us: It is to you that my words are directed so that you may learn humility and wisdom. For I will make holy all those who treat others with respect and those who have compassion and show mercy to others.*

We thank God for all those who laid down their lives in order to give us the opportunity of being peacemakers in our own day. And we grieve with all those who are hurting from past atrocities – by actively refusing to hate.