

A Reflection for Remembrance from the Revd Ali Massey

In this service we remember all the conflicts that have been sought at an incredible cost by all those heroes who heard and responded to the call to service. Service, that has bought us all our freedom to live in this beautiful country, in a democracy where we are all free to express our opinions and live our lives in freedom.

“Greater love has no one than this; that one lays down his life for his friends”. John 15:13

This year of all years, there is an echo of that call and response to service from all our contemporary front-line heroes. Our wonderful and undervalued NHS, the emergency services, the care sector, teachers, our unsung heroes in retail, logistics, security, drivers - HGV, taxi and bus drivers, cleaners, pharmacists, rubbish collectors, funeral directors and so many more. All those people who have, day after day, faithfully responded to the call to duty during the Coronavirus pandemic. And unfortunately, many of them too have paid the ultimate price.

“Greater love has no one than this; that one lays down his life for his friends”.

During the First World War, the anguish and grief that was felt by the death of so many loved ones was dealt with in church. In the presence of God and in the setting up of memorials to those who had paid the ultimate sacrifice. They were saying to God, and to themselves, that *this* untimely death *had* to mean something; surely it had value and worth; surely it made sense in the mind of God. Today we empathise with their grief, and sense of loss.

Those first Remembrance Days were intensely personal: “Let it be that my son, husband, brother or father did not die in vain!” That is why gathering together, virtually or in person, is so important. To annually remember the sacrifice made by so many. And by remembering, to be encouraged to work together for lasting peace so that their sacrifice was not in vain.

“The Kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”. Those are the opening words of a Taizé chant. I’m not going to sing it for you, but it continues “Come, Lord, and open in us the gates of your kingdom”.

Is our world, is the kingdom of the earth one of justice and peace?

Today we gather to remember the few, the few that so many of us owe so much too. Without whom our way of life would be very different. We also remember those who have died in the service of their country since the war to end all wars. Those brave men and women who have followed orders without question, who gave of their best in dire circumstances, to protect the freedom that was earned in such a costly fashion. Those in the two world wars, Korea, Malaysia, Cyprus, Aden, Northern Ireland and more recently the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan. We also remember those other brave public servants who day by day risk their lives as they carry out their duties. Our NHS, firefighters, police officers and all the professionals who risk their lives alongside the armed forces; for whom a day at work can end in the greatest sacrifice of all.

Jesus sums up that courage and sacrifice in John's Gospel when outlining the commandment to love one another as God loves us.

"Greater love has no one than this; that one lays down his life for his friends".

Greater love has no-one who lays down their life in the struggle for justice and peace; God is opening in them the gates of his kingdom.

One of the joys of being a vicar is working with children and sharing sacred stories with them. Encouraging them to think about God and how God impacts on their lives and on everything they do. I like to regularly evaluate the sessions I offer, and in the past, the one comment that regularly comes back is; how important it is to give children the space, time and permission to ask the big questions.

I remember leading a session on the Exodus story, when Moses led the people of God out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom in the promised land. During the discussion after the story, one of the children asked why God had done terrible things to the Egyptian people when it was really only the Pharaoh who was very bad. Bearing in mind that the children in the group were aged between 7 and 10 years old, the discussion was one that concentrated on the injustice and oppression of many innocent people by a few powerful individuals. Over the course of the discussion they identified the need for change of the whole system, rather than just the removal of one person who would soon be replaced with another who would carry on the same cruel injustice and oppression.

Those young children recognised the need for the kingdom of the earth to be one of justice and peace.

Isn't that a story that is being lived out in our world today? In places where whole systems of injustice and oppression need to be changed, by people in whom God is opening the gates of God's kingdom, to bring about a transformation that will bring justice, peace and freedom from oppression.

The kingdom of the world needs to be transformed into an echo of the kingdom of God where justice and peace prevail.

In human history we have a template for this change, an example of how to change the kingdom of the earth into an echo of the kingdom of God. The change that came when God broke into human history in the person of Jesus Christ to change the system, to empower and to challenge each person to fight against injustice, to strive for peace and to set those in slavery free. Jesus gives us the words. He models a life striving for justice and peace, for freedom for the oppressed. Jesus didn't accept the status quo, he wasn't ruled by self-interest, he was motivated by love. Love for all God's creation. He showed us the way to live our lives and opens in us the gates of God's kingdom.

"Greater love has no one than this; that one lays down his life for his friends".

Jesus gave his life not only for his friends but also for his enemies. As God, Jesus had no need to experience human suffering, but he did for all our sakes. The evil that men do, the evil that separates us from God - Jesus died to reconcile us to God.

He died in our place, the one perfect sacrifice for all that can open in us the gates of God's kingdom, if we let him. Jesus reconciled man to God, through dying on the Cross. This reconciliation is a gift that we can receive simply by asking Christ to come into our lives. As St John wrote:

"But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." John 1:12

So, we are remembering today. We are remembering those people who took up the challenge. To personally fight and in many cases lay down their lives in the battle against injustice, in the hope of peace and to set those entrapped in slavery free.

We remember those whose sacrifice is in the past, those whose sacrifice is in the present and those who will continue to sacrifice themselves in the future.

But what about us?

We are all charged to fight injustice, strive for peace and free the oppressed. So how can we play our part? We can hold others to account. We can lobby parliament, big companies. We can stand alongside the poor and support charities. We can fight against extremism by not engaging in the scapegoating that is so prevalent in some parts of the popular press.

After all, for evil to proliferate it only takes good people to do nothing.

Let us make each day that we are blessed to live in this free, democratic country of ours count. What will you do today to make the kingdom of earth a kingdom of justice and peace?

Jesus chose *you*, he commissioned *you* to go out and bear fruit – the fruit that is justice, peace and freedom so that in times to come the swords **will** be turned into ploughshares, the spears into pruning knives so that all humanity can live in justice, peace and freedom.

Amen