

10 November 2019 Remembrance Sunday

Saint Mary's Church, Linton

Both my grandfathers fought in WW1. One grandfather fought with the Buffs but he refused ever to talk about the war and it was only when my brother found some of his letters and did some research that we understood better what he had been through.

Remembering the past can be a painful process. And there is good reason why it might be painful, as illustrated by Private Gilbert Williams in a letter, dated 6 April, 1916

We are in the trenches just now. In fact we seem to spend about three times as much time in as we do out. Also we are in a pretty warm spot, it was about here, towards the end of last summer that the French and German had some of the fiercest fighting of the war. The country around about is a veritable maze of trenches. The fighting at one time was so fierce that there was only time just to bury the dead in the sides of the trenches... There will be a horrible smell here in the summer. I only hope we are not here then. In places we are only about twenty yards away from the enemy. Consequently, at all times the air is pretty thick with bombs, grenades and trench mortars. These last are pretty hellish sort of toys. They have an explosion like about ten earthquakes rolled into one.

Sadly, war seems to be a necessary evil in a world where people are unable to settle their differences peacefully. When my eldest daughter was little, she said on more than one occasion, 'Daddy, why can't people just be nice to each other?' There are no easy answers to this simple but profound question, but in the Christian tradition one answer is that the risk God takes in giving us free will is that we have the capacity to do extraordinary acts of goodness and equally extraordinary acts of destruction.

The writers of the Bible really understood this tension between wanting peace and yet being realistic about human nature.

In the story of Noah and the great flood (Genesis 9:8-17), God punishes humans for their greed, selfishness and wickedness which they have inflicted on the world. After the devastation God makes a new promise with Noah and

humanity that he will never again cleanse the world in this way. The sign of this promise is the rainbow, a sign which represents our duties to God.

God says,

‘When I bring the clouds over the earth and the rainbow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you... Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.’

The promise God makes with Noah is two-way, it is a covenant. Our side of the promise is that we all have a duty to protect the world, to respect all living creatures – not just other humans but the whole planet. For war doesn’t just kill people, it destroys animals, plant life and whole eco-systems.

So, today we remember that we have a crucial role as stewards of our fragile world.

But we are also here today to remember those who were prepared to honour God’s covenant of peace. The armed forces today express this through their six values and standards: courage, discipline, respect for others, integrity, loyalty and above all selfless commitment.

Remembering war and those who have fought in WW1 and subsequent wars is a painful but necessary process. We do it to honour those who died for their country, but we also do it to remind ourselves of our basic duties to each other, to humanity and to our planet.

We are just about to hear the Last Post played on the trumpet, so let me end with the words of John F Kennedy in his Presidential inaugural address 20 January 1961 as he outlines our continued covenant duties - *our* trumpet-call - to the world:

‘Now the trumpet summons us again - not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need - not as a call to battle, though embattled we are - but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.’