

Sermon at Sung Mass on Remembrance Sunday, 10 November 2019, preached at S. Botolph, Cambridge.

Readings: Job 19:20-27

First, let me thank Father Stephen and all here at S Botolph's for welcoming me this morning; it's an honour and privilege to be here, and I bring greetings from your neighbouring parish of Little S. Mary's where I am usually to be found, and which has, once again, become my home after a very exciting and growth-filled year as Pastoral Assistant – or Intern – of Christ Church, the Anglican presence in Vienna! This time last year I was leading the Act of Remembrance at a place called Cunovo, just outside of Bratislava.

An RAF bomber was shot down there by the occupying Nazi forces in Slovakia, 65 years ago this year.

2019 also marks the 40th anniversary of the start of the Soviet-Afghan War, in which up to 2 million civilians were killed.

And we're all, I'm sure, aware of the Battle of the Somme, in which there were over 70,000 casualties on the first day alone, the 1 July 1916.

Remembrance Day is a chance to give thanks and remember those who have given their lives for the service of their country and neighbour, praying that all may rest in peace and be raised in glory, and giving thanks for our continued fellowship with them. In that sense, it's fitting that Remembrance Sunday follows immediately on from our commemorations of All Saints and All Souls last weekend. It's also a chance to commit ourselves to remembering well, in order to commit ourselves to work for peace and justice, knowing that a failure to remember the traumatic events of history well condemns us to repeating them.

But it also raises many tricky questions.

As well as showcasing heroic acts of bravery and valour, the embodiment of Jesus' words in the Gospel reading this morning, that 'greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for his friends,' war can bring out the worst of the human suffering, and its atrocities the worst of the human condition.

In light of this, it seems sensible to ask:

Why are there so many wars? Why does God allow nation to rise up against nation? Why does God allow so many lives to be lost, and so many families and livelihoods to be torn apart by conflicts in so many parts of the world? Why is man so intent on causing brutality and destruction?

These are all valid questions. Awkward questions to which there is no easy answer. But we are called, as is Job throughout the book bearing his name, to recognise and trust that even when we cannot comprehend or make sense of what goes on around us, our God is sovereign. We are called this as every Remembrance Sunday to affirm our trust in Him and His purposes for the world.

The first thing to say is that the Bible does not shy away from human suffering. For all those who have lost, and continue to lose their children in armed conflict, the image of Our Lady standing weeping at the foot of the Cross is a sure comfort. For all who have been forced to flee and become refugees as a result of war, then it could be the image of the Holy Family, Mother Mary and Joseph her spouse, taking their son into exile in Egypt for safe-keeping. Because our faith is incarnational, rooted in the Word made Flesh, it is not abstract but has the power to speak into whatever situation we find ourselves. We are called to trust in the face of despair and conflict, because we have a God who was Himself not immune to suffering at the hands of the human obsession with creating division.

Job had experienced the very worst, the very messiest of human suffering: he had lost everything he held dear. His family, his offspring, his possessions, his health, his livelihood have all vanished before him. And in chapter 19, just before this morning's passage, it seems he has lost his friends too. Whether we call it being Job's comforters, as the idiom goes, or rubbing salt in his wounds, they offer some of the most offensive words in Scripture. How long will you torment me and crush me with your words, asks Job in despair.

Over the course of the book, and indeed to my mind beginning in this chapter, Job comes to recognise that the only satisfactory response to suffering and uncertainty is to trust in what is certain.

Yes, he continues to protest his innocence and lament the unfairness of the whole situation, but nonetheless he trusts that suffering, pain, and despair will not have the last word, that even after his skin has perished, he will be given a new flesh and will, one day, see everything clearly. Job is confident that the final enemy of death that has so very much plagued him and his family – as it did many families during the First, Second and other world wars, will be defeated.

“I know that my redeemer liveth”, says Job. Apologies for making you have Handel's *Messiah* stuck in your heads for the rest of the day – sorry but not sorry, as the saying goes!

These aren't empty, sentimental words but a declaration of faith in the midst of this suffering.

It's an utterance of trust, of confidence that he will be vindicated and redeemed, of dependence, of surrender to God's will and sovereignty. Job, in the midst, of his suffering, knows that the day will come when he will be in another country, all whose ways are righteousness, gentleness, and peace, where tears, pain, and crying will be no more.

The Hebrew word *go'el* used here is a complicated technical word. It means both redeemer and vindicator. It has legal connotations. Theologians debate which of the two intended meanings is Job's. He is both convinced that he is innocent and wants to be vindicated, but all the more so is

Job, in his affliction, sure of his need for a redeemer. Human inability to live at peace with one another, the greed and envy that so often causes wars illustrate why we too, we all, are in need of a redeemer. We can all fall short of the lofty standards of living at peace with one another, of loving all regardless of creed and race. It's easy to separate ourselves from Job in this era of individualism, and think that we don't need a Redeemer – that we are basically good and can look after ourselves – but how wrong that is! The continued lack of peace in the world is testament to the fact to have a living redeemer is as Good News to us in the 21st century as it was to Job in the 6th century BC.

These questions with which I opened are tricky. We, with Job, don't have any perfect justifications for the suffering and conflict and affliction that has been – and indeed continues to be a reality for so many in war-torn areas of the world. We don't have all the answers. As God will go on to tell Job some 20 chapters later:

“Who is this that darkenest counsel by words without knowledge, where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare if thou hast understanding.” Or as a more modern translation puts it, who obscures my plans by words without knowledge?

We could try to philosophise on the problem of evil, we could try to find answers to the great questions of why there is so much suffering in the world, so much war and so much violence, but perhaps we too would only be darkening counsel by words without knowledge. Or we too could surrender ourselves to the changeless, timeless and perfect ways of our sovereign God and have faith in His purposes for the world

And that is what we do in the Holy Mass.

In this Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar that we shall celebrate together shortly, we find our *ark from the ocean's roar*, in the words of that great Eucharistic hymn, that is the presence of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He is both a

redeemer and vindicator. And because of His resurrection, we know that our confidence, with Job, in a bodily resurrection, is not empty or in vain – that we, along with him and all those who in faith gave their lives for justice and their fellow man, will one day see God face-to-face. He has been our help in ages past and will be our help for years to come. We bring to the Altar our anxieties, fears, hopes and dreams for the world, and pray for the welfare of all nations as we approach this Altar with humility and trust that God is in control, that the God who calls each one of us is faithful and will deliver His people.

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