

Sermon

Sunday 9th November, 2008

Lessons Isaiah 25: 1 – 9 Revelation 22: 1 – 5 St Matthew 5: 38 – 48

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Almighty God, in whom is hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; open our eyes that we may behold wondrous things out of Your law; and give us grace that we may clearly understand and heartily choose the way of Your commandments; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On 13th May, 1940 the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, entered the House of Commons to make a brief speech about forming an administration consisting of members from all the major parties. His speech concluded with these, now famous, words:

I say to the House as I said to ministers who have joined this government, I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many months of struggle and suffering.

You ask, what is our policy? I say it is to wage war by land, sea and air. War with all our might and with all the strength God has given us, and to wage war against a monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy.

You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word. It is victory. Victory at all costs; victory in spite of all terrors; victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival.

I take up my task in buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. I feel entitled at this juncture, at this time, to claim the aid of all and to say, ‘Come, then, let us go forward together with our united strength.’

Churchill delivered many memorable speeches and that was surely one of them: Our policy is to wage war: war with all our might, war with all our strength. Our aim is victory at all costs. This speech and these words are moving and dramatic. They stir the heart and soul and fire the imagination. This is oratory at its best. Surely these words and many like them from the Prime Minister gave our people and our armed forces confidence and hope in the midst of war. Churchill's speeches were often, though not always, rousing, inspirational and truly gifted, but why do we bring our need to remember war, conflict and human suffering into Church and into our worship?

On 8th December, 1941 President Franklin D Roosevelt appeared before the US Congress asking for a declaration of war. Roosevelt said:

Mr Vice President, Mr Speaker, members of the Senate and the House of Representatives:

Yesterday, December 7, 1941 – a date that will live in infamy – the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Island has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Yesterday the Japanese Government also launched an attack against Malaya. Last night Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong. Last night Japanese forces attacked Guam. Last night Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands. Last night the Japanese attacked Wake Island. And this morning the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory and our interests are in grave danger.

With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounded determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph. So help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.

These words are almost sixty-seven years old but they have lost nothing of their import and potency, of their gravity and magnitude. Eloquent as they may be, these words spoken by the leader of such a powerful nation are frightening but why do we bring our need to remember war, conflict and human suffering into Church and into our worship?

In his Sonnets from China, W H Auden remembers the massacre of Nanking as well as the systematic cold-blooded murder of Dachau. Auden wrote:

Here war is harmless like a monument:
a telephone is talking to a man;
flags on a map declare that troops were sent;
a boy brings milk in bowls. There is a plan

For living men in terror of their lives
who thirst at nine who were to thirst at noon,
who can be lost and are, who miss their wives
And, unlike an idea, can die too soon.

Yet ideas can be true, although men die:
for we have seen a myriad faces
Ecstatic from one lie,

And maps can really point to places

where life is evil now.
Nanking. Dachau.

In December, 1937, the Japanese Imperial Army marched into China's capital city of Nanking and proceeded to murder 300,000 out of 600,000 civilians and soldiers in the city. The six weeks of carnage would become known as the Rape of Nanking or the Nanking Massacre and represented the single worst atrocity during the World War II era in either the European or Pacific theatre of war. The brutality was shocking by any standard. Political leaders in America and Britain remained focussed on the worsening situation in Europe. One westerner in Nanking at the time described the city as 'hell on earth,' while another said, 'I did not imagine that such cruel people existed in the modern world.' It is truly sobering to think that the Second World War and these atrocities took place within living memory but why do we bring these remembrances into Church and into our worship?

In his book, *Their Darkest Hour*, Laurence Rees recounts the story of a man called Peter Lee. Lee joined the RAF in 1939. He was a supply officer in the Far East and by 1942 he was caught and imprisoned by the Japanese. Over the course of his imprisonment, he was held in four jails, in Java, Singapore and, in Jesselton in North Borneo and finally in Sandakan, in north eastern Borneo.

Peter Lee said of Sandakan:

Many of our men died in the early days in Sandakan because they

were really too far gone after the experiences of Jesselton to make a recovery. I can remember every day I used to go and see our men in the sick bays. And you'd find a young man that I'd known as a typical example of young British manhood – fit as a fiddle in Singapore – and you'd either find them horribly emaciated, ghosts of their former self, or incredibly bloated with beriberi....People who reached that degree of malnutrition and illness, they didn't recover.

Japanese soldiers, known as 'bashers', were said to 'smash' the British about.

Peter Lee survived partly by good fortune and because, he said, he let go of hatred, let go of anger and banished self-pity. He looked for the positive in each moment but in light of all that he saw, he said, 'My considered opinion, over the whole range of our experience, was that the Japanese treatment of prisoners of war was brutal, sadistic and uncivilised.' In 1943, there were 2500 POWs in Sandakan, 1800 Australians and 700 British. By the end of the war, only six Australians survived. Every single one of the 700 British prisoners had died. Peter Lee had known many of those men. The author, Laurence Rees, states:

With hindsight, of course, we can see that all the pre-conditions for this crime existed within the Japanese Imperial Army: the Japanese contempt for prisoners of war, their own belief that to surrender was contemptible, the brutality that pervaded the administrative and leadership structure of the military and the Japanese desire to work POWs like beasts of burden on starvation rations. Given all this, an atrocity like Sandakan was always possible.

Why bring our need or desire to remember the absolute horror of war, conflict and human suffering into Church and into our worship?

Though war can bring out of men and women heroism, bravery and devotion to comrades the likes of which no peace-time pursuit can match, the ghastliness of war is intolerable and too high a price for any heroism or glory that it might on occasion yield. Each week when we come to Church and to worship we bring with us our burdens and brokenness, our failures and flaws as well as our hopes and dreams, loves and interests. In prayer and silence, in song and meditation, we bring them all and lay them down before God, before the throne of grace.

At no time is humanity more broken, more barbaric and more in need of divine salvation, healing, wholeness and forgiveness than in our propensity to hate, diminish others and perpetrate war against fellow human beings, fellow bearers of the divine image. It would be ludicrous if we could not bring our brokenness, in all its manifestations, before the throne of grace. We present our suffering and we pray for healing. We present our sinfulness, pray for forgiveness and for the wisdom and understanding to listen and learn from God.

Jesus said, 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that spitefully use you, and persecute you.' I do not pretend that these words are ever easy to deliver. I do not doubt that the demand of these words is above and beyond what is humanly possible for many of us, but these are the words of God. When I hear these words I feel in my heart that these are the words of God: only God could say these words, truly mean them, and faithfully and in all circumstances live them out. The morality

and ethics of these words lift us all the way up to heaven. In the Book of Revelation we are told that, at the throne of God, there shall be no more curse, there will be the healing of the nations and we shall see God's face. The prophet, Isaiah, wrote:

O LORD, thou art my God; I will exalt thee,
I will praise thy name; for thou hast done
wonderful things; thy counsels of old are
faithfulness and truth.

In meditation, in dream, in trance, the prophet's vision has been directed to heaven: he praises the name of God, he pledges his devotion to God, and he recites the wonderful things which God can do. Perhaps the gulf between human brokenness and God's wholeness is nowhere more exposed than on this Sunday, on Remembrance Sunday, and for that reason it is right, proper and our duty as Christians to bring our need and desire to remember war, conflict and human suffering into Church and into our worship. God is our solace, our companion, lover and friend: He is our refuge and our strength, a present help in time of trouble.

Amen.