

November is a month of remembrances. In our Church calendar it forms a sort of mini season which rounds off the Church year. It is particularly dedicated to all the Saints, the Christian heroes of the past, not least the martyrs whose faith led them to lay down their lives in witness to their faith. But it celebrates all those in whose lives the light of Christ has been recognised as shining particularly brightly. Their memory is set before us as an example to follow, to encourage us to walk the way of Jesus Christ that they did, so that his way of life, a way of love, compassion, peace, and justice may increase in this world. In our Gospel today, we read of the very first of those who heard the call of Jesus to follow him and his way, ordinary people who joined his movement, his cause, which hoped, and still hopes, to change the world.

On Remembrance Sunday and Remembrance Day we celebrate another special community of heroes: those who have given their lives in the cause of freedom and peace. The vast majority were ordinary men and women who went to war because they volunteered or had to, and many of them did not come back. And we think of those who came back to a life that would always be dependent on the care and assistance of others. Or those for whom the mental wounds would not heal. A former parishioner of mine was among the first British soldiers to enter and liberate the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945. He had already experienced armed conflict and the loss of friends in war, but nothing could prepare him for what he encountered in that dreadful place, the carnage, the emaciated human wrecks, the visible presence of unbelievable cruelty caused by human beings to other human beings. Whenever I visited this man in his care home, he nearly always reflected on it in tears.

We may think today particularly of our own war dead, from our families, communities and certainly our nation. But the scope of our remembrance and tribute is always broader than that, certainly if we have come to church to do the remembering. As we gather here today, as indeed for every Sunday and service, we form an international community. As Christians gathered for worship, we transcend boundaries of nationality, race, or whatever it is that anyone might be tempted to think makes them different or superior to anyone else on this planet.

Together we remember the fallen from every nation and from all sides of the conflicts. We remember among them those who were sent to do their duty for

their country, whether they wanted to or not, whether they agreed with it or not. And today, we continue to share the sorrow and sadness that war is still a reality on this earth, as we think and pray for the people and the armed forces of Ukraine, still coping bravely with the act of aggression inflicted on them, not by another nation or people but by a despotic system which we surely hoped had been confined to the past. And we think of the Middle East, a conflict that will have no winners, if indeed any conflict really does have a winner. It is the peace that must always be won, where people of every side of the divide can come to live side by side in safety, and in due course, with mutual respect, forgiveness, and solidarity. If we think that is idealistic wishful thinking, then we need only ask ourselves how long we wish the human race or even the planet itself to survive. Human beings cannot go on living as enemies. The biggest enemy to be defeated is enmity itself.

The peace of the world, the prevention of war and aggression begins with us, and the way we live our lives, and especially the way we regard and treat others. We do well to see if there is any trace of destructive negatives in our hearts or attitudes. In the thought for the day on the pew sheet, I am always moved on Remembrance Sunday to use the words of that brave young Dutch woman, Etty Hillesum, who was imprisoned and murdered with her parents and brother at Auschwitz, and simply because they were Jewish. In such extreme circumstances at the end of her short life, she was still able to write in her journal, 'Each of us must.....destroy in ourselves all that we think we ought to destroy in others,.....every atom of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable.'

Today, most of all, our remembrance leads us to pray earnestly for peace and for the welfare of every nation. Prayer must always translate into action. It is by living at peace with ourselves and with those around us, whoever they are, fellow national and so-called foreigner, those of every race and tribe and belief and condition, that is the best tribute we can pay to those who have given their lives opposing the evil aggression and megalomania of the despot the demagogue, and the fanatic.

Lives that understand that all of us as human beings are connected, lives that display solidarity, concern and compassion with those we share life with on this earth, enable us to share in the divine enterprise of creating and sustaining life.

As human beings, we all have the capacity to contribute to the building of a community and world where everyone is a brother and a sister, and where we discover together our true humanity, formed in the image and likeness of God.