

"At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them." *Ode to the fallen*

The familiar closing words of the "Ode to the fallen" that have woven themselves into the annual Act of Remembrance that is observed in Churches right accross our land on this the Sunday closest to Remembrance Day. Along with them we have the reading of the names of the fallen, the silence, often the last post, the familiar words of our reading from the book of the prophet Micah that speak of the nations beating their swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks.

What is it that we are doing this day? What went through your minds as I read the names of the fallen, as we stood in the silence that followed? Maybe some of you even thought, 'Why are we still doing this, nearly sixty years after the end of the Second World War?' That is a perfectly valid question. What I want to do is to share with you this morning some of my own thoughts on this matter and explain why I think it is just as important to do this now as it was in previous generations.

For some of you the memory of war, of the fallen is all too real. Some of you have known active service and have memories of loss of friends, of comrades, have known what it is to be in mortal danger. Some will have lost someone in your immediate family. A day such as this is a day to come before God with those memories.

If you are in my generation, born immediately after the last war - we have memories at second hand. I think of my uncle, a pilot in bomber command telling me of taking part in the big raids on the German

cities - the feeling of relief that he had survived another mission, anguish over the fate of those crews that had not come back, anguish for those living in the cities that he had just bombed. I think of two neighbours - one who had served in the Navy during two of the major naval engagements of the last war, another, a Hungarian refugee who had been forced to fight on the Russian Front, each with their own stories of excitement and great suffering.

Those who remember, who served in the two world wars are getting fewer and fewer in number. In deed the time will surely come when there will be no more veterans of the First World War. Should we continue to observe this day - or should we let it gently fizzle out? Year by year I am becoming more and more convinced that we should not. As I think I have said before, it is good to be reminded of the reality of war.

Wars happen when things go badly wrong, they are a reminder of the fallen nature of man, of the brokenness of humanity, of the power of sin to destroy. Our Old Testament Lesson, from the Book of the Prophet Micah, speaks of a time in the future when war will be no more. There will be no more war because God will be back in control in the hearts and minds of men and nations. In this new era, weapons of war will be redundant:

the sword will be beaten into a ploughshare,
the spear into a pruning hook.

There is a contrasting message, in the Book of the Prophet Joel. Speaking of a time of impending crisis, he speaks of a time when the ploughshare will be fashioned into a sword and a pruning hook into a spear.

To compare the two: Micah speaks of the peace of the coming Kingdom of God. Joel speaks to me of crises that happen in a fallen world that is still short of the Kingdom. Times when evil has to be resisted, has to be faced down.

What we are reminded of on a day such as this is that there are occasions when the ploughshare had to be fashioned into a sword and the spear into the pruning hook. That there are times in our history when the word of international politics went badly wrong, when armed force was the only option.

When we find ourselves saying "Send in the army!", the reading of the names reminds us that wars, however necessary we may feel them to be, are fought at great cost. As we read those names, even though most of us have no idea who they were, or even the families they came from, I am reminded that families just like my family lost brothers, sisters, children, parents. I am reminded that the freedoms we enjoy today did not just happen - they are the fruit of someone else's sacrifice, someone else's heartbreak.

In the wake of the awful events of September of last year and the conflicts that have followed, the world is a very unsettled place at the moment. The continuing tensions surrounding Iraq, the continuing uncertainty regarding the plans and capabilities of such groups as Al-Qaeda have compounded this.

Over the coming weeks, world leaders are going to face difficult decisions that will impact on us all. Is this to be a time of fashioning the ploughshare into the sword, the pruning hook into the spear? Such

decisions may result in conflict, in the death and injury of members of our own armed forces, those of the enemy or civilian populations.

Those are awesome responsibilities. Whatever our feelings towards these leaders, they are in need of continuing prayer, that the decisions they make may be the right ones. We also pray for members of the armed forces in whatever lies before them as on this day we remember the sacrifice of previous generations.

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