

The Commonwealth Remembrance Sunday Service 2023

The Beatitudes, Matthew 5.12

May the words of my and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight of Lord.
Our strength and our redeemer. Psalm 19:14

Our world is not a happy place... Is this the understatement of the year? From my vantage point that of someone born after Second World War I can say that the world is in the most precarious state I have known it in my lifetime with the war in Ukraine well into its second year, the flight of over 100,000 Armenians from Nagorno-Karabach in September, the massacre of Jews in Israel by Hamas on 7 October and the subsequent fallout with large numbers of Palestinian civilians traumatised, maimed or killed and this list fails to mention the Sahel States now in the hands of military regimes and the other challenges facing us concerning the environment, resources, high inflation and the growing world population coupled with questions of migration that seem to be insoluble. Many countries are beset by mafia-like organisations they cannot control. In some of our nation states there are no-go areas for the police, who are called to regulate and ensure safety. What can we say as we remember those who gave their lives in the First and Second World Wars and subsequent conflicts like the Korean War, the Vietnam War and more recently the First and Second Iraqi wars and the war in Afghanistan with the subsequent withdrawal of troops in 2021.

How may we motivate ourselves not to give into despair that will lame us? How can we stop ourselves from withdrawing into ourselves leaving the field to others? How might we continue to take responsibility, when so much of what we say and do is or seems ineffective?

A beginning is made by continuing to respond to the annual call to remember. Today in particular we remember that on 11 November 1918 an armistice, a laying down of arms, was signed between the Allies of the First World War and Germany at Compiègne, France, at 5:45 am allowing for the cessation of hostilities on the Western Front taking effect at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Later Americans would name Armistice Day Veterans Day, we calling it Remembrance Day. The Versailles Treaty, the peace treaty, was signed months later on 29 June 1919. It is estimated that the casualties of The Great War as

it was first called numbered over 40 million and of those 20 million died and 21 million were wounded and of those 21 million wounded 10 million were military personnel and 11 million civilians. Given these numbers, those who warn us today that we are on a slippery slope must be heeded.

Yesterday a number of us here stood in the Commonwealth War Graves' cemetery in Klagenfurt to make the Act of Remembrance surrounded by the fallen a poignant reminder of the cost of war. On three graves next to each other the tombstone of each carried a last message. J. Southwood, 25, RA Ordnance Corps "Peacefully sleeping free from pain. In God's own time we will meet." W.J. Pettipher, 25, RA Ordnance Corps "In God's garden we will meet again." R. Marchant, 20, The Buffs "Though Land and Sea divide us you will be with us forever. God bless you son." Taking time to remember is more than wearing a poppy, but the poppy can hopefully be a signal saying: I am aware. I do care. I do remember. I will seek to make a contribution towards building peace in my spheres of responsibility.

Today in this sacred space set aside and dedicated to the Glory of God we take time to remember. Importantly we do so before God, the living God. In our prayers we remember man's inhumanity never diminished and we ask for mercy. We remember that we all cherish the hope within that we might be numbered amongst the peacemakers and thereby be blessed as Jesus promises. We pray that wars may cease. With the prophets we hope nations and peoples will beat "their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." This is a desirable goal to which we should always be tending, leaning, bending even though it eludes us. This the hope of the prophet, God's spokesperson, is introduced with a reminder that in the end it is God and God alone who will judge between the nations and it is God who will arbitrate for many peoples.

It would seem that all of us have a view increasingly strident and often understandably so on the conflict between Israel and Hamas, what one might term the horizontal perspective, but here in this place we recall that there is also a vertical perspective. God's judgement. Yes, we must give account to our fellow human beings, or at least to some of our fellow human beings, but all of us must give account to God for our actions and our attitudes. The things we have done and the things we have left undone. We must give account to God who knows our

hearts. As cited by the prophet Jeremiah, God says: “I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.”

Our forgetfulness concerning God and the things of God is captured in at least one of the Psalms. There our forgetfulness concerning God and the things eternal is recorded in lines memorably put to music by Handel, “Why do the nations so furiously rage together: and why do the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth stand up, and the rulers take counsel together: against the Lord, and against his Anointed.” Our rebellion is great. These words ring as true today as they must have done in the 6th century BCE. We cannot soften them.

Amongst us there are representatives from the US, Germany, Ukraine, Turkey (??), and our host nation Austria. By our coming together from across the Commonwealth and beyond, we quietly set a sign in the city of Vienna with its own tales of past woes tucked away from the madding crowds in this church. In a time of so many great divisions of our own making not only between nations and peoples, but often within our societies even splitting churches and families our common desire to unite to remember the casualties and victims of war is a sign of hope that if we will allow may encourage us. Allow us dear God to draw strength from this diverse gathering of peoples with all our differences. Give us such humility that for a moment we might acknowledge our common humanity and that lasting hope is in you alone. This unique assembly in this place means that there are things that can still unite us, when so much seems divisive or hopeless. On this day I am always reminded of the public intellectual George Steiner, “We must also remember we have a future.” And for the sake of this future we are here before God to remember, to pray and to commit ourselves to the pursuit of peace. **Amen.**