

‘Do not grieve as those who have no hope’. These are the words we hear from Paul today as he addresses the congregation in Thessalonica. They are a powerful message, and one that it is apt for us today. But how do we hold onto hope, when grief seems so near, when fear seems so imminent.

Today, with many across this nation we stop for Remembrance Sunday. We call the impact of war in history – especially the impact of the two World Wars at the start of the twentieth century. We pray for those who have died, pray for peace in the world, and ask that it may never happen again.

One of my favourite television shows to watch is M.A.S.H which is set in the Korean War, though it was actually filmed as social comment on the Vietnam war. There is one episode when the head of the camp, Colonel Potter the older commander who started in the cavalry in WW1 and is now a surgeon in a combat hospital in Korea, calls all his friends together to make a toast to a long term friend who has died. He begins the toast by saying ‘to those friends I lost in WW1 – the war to end all wars; and to the friends I lost in the war after that!’ It is such a poignant comment on the hoped for outcome of any conflict – that it was or will be the last.

Each year we come to remember. Each year we come to pray for peace. And each year Wars continue.

‘Do not grieve as those who have no hope’

The hope Paul calls us to, is not a hope in humanity – for humanity is unable to let go of its quest for power, but rather our hope is in God who calls us to be ready, who calls us to a prepared faith, where we do not lose sight of the wonder of creation which God has created.

Hope means we do not remember for nostalgia, but to remind us that the actions we take – the lives we live – the choices we make have consequences.

At the end of today’s service we will move to the memorial at the back of church which lists the names of men who died from this parish in the first and second world wars, as well as those who died when the Police Station was bombed. 3 years ago we began a period of remembering and commemorating the First World War, and as a congregation we embarked on a history project. A number of individuals and families in our congregation have researched the names which appear on this memorial – and we have found some interesting things. Some of the names were of teachers who we think taught at Salusbury School, most were part of the London Regiment, some were young local men, who were born in the area, signed up in the first days of war as only very young men and never returned. There was one man who even died on the 11th November 1918. Their stories tell us not only of the sadness of war, but also give us a picture of what life in this area was like in the early 20th century – a community of people who lived near

where they worked, and while they had many addresses, mostly stayed within a few streets of the house they were born in.

One of the reasons we are taking part in this project is because it is part of the story of who we are as a parish and as a community, and knowing our history helps us to understand some of our current behaviours. I suspect that there are many patterns that we have as a community which reflect some of the stories from our past.

Looking at the past may seem like an odd thing to do in light of the readings which we have heard today. But our story as a community of faith is informed by the knowledge that we, like those who have gone before us long for the day when there is no war – in fact sometimes we may feel overwhelmed by the fact that war continues!

Our readings this week focus on consequences and yearning “How long will we have to wait, Jesus?” – we may yearn for the coming of God’s kingdom or the coming of peace and an end to war – yet this question expressed in our readings expresses what is almost unutterable -- the lack of control, the fear of the unknown, the worry of whether or not we are ready, the anxiety about being prepared for what is to come.

Waiting carries many emotions -- anticipation, wonder, dread, agitation, fear, loss. Of course, much of our emotional response is determined by that for which we wait. Our time of waiting will be experienced differently depending on that which we expect. Interestingly our experience of waiting is so often linked to the way that we remember and the experiences we have had.

In our gospel reading the Bridesmaids wait and yet not all the bridesmaids in the parable use this time well. Only half of the bridesmaid prepared themselves – they had plenty of time during daylight to purchase more oil – plenty of warning that the wedding was coming and yet they chose not to prepare. Their exclusion is not a surprise, they had made their choice. So while we may feel that it is a harsh story – and at one level it is – it also, like many of the events today, focuses our minds on the choices we make. We have a responsibility to use the knowledge we have to make a difference – even in our waiting. This story, like all stories, both parables, and stories of history – is trying to teach us something about who we are.

Yesterday while I was finishing my sermon, there was an antenatal class taking place in the committee room. While I try hard not to listen, there are some words that float through the door! One of the things I have noticed from all the antenatal classes is the focus on being ready – but also knowing that each birth will be its own story, in its own time. There is a balance between being prepared, managing the waiting, and the anxiety, as well as knowing that we do not know when the birth will occur (no matter how much curry you eat!)

So much of our faith is about waiting for Jesus – waiting for this to change – the anticipation of answers to the prayers we offer; anticipation that God’s Kingdom will be realised. One of the commentators I was reading this week about this gospel reading, Susan Heylan¹, describes the wise bridesmaids as those who affirm their faith – that is believing and acting that Christ is coming – or trusting that God is a God of justice and mercy. She suggests this is a vision against which we judge our efforts in the meantime to live according to God’s principles. It is a vision of God’s ultimate justice and righteousness without which our world appears very bleak.

‘Do not grieve as those who have no hope, but rather live in the promise of life and justice which God has given’

Remembrance Day is important not only to honour those who have died in the pursuit of peace and justice; not only to remind us that we have a responsibility to give thanks for those who have gone before us; not only to count the cost of war – but it is important for today because it should change the way that we live today. Our remembering informs what we are waiting for, what we are yearning for - it nurtures our desire for peace and justice.

It reminds us that we should live in expectation, live in a way that will transform the world. Live as wise bridesmaids – or as those who anticipate change, not just long for it – a people who have hope.

Today, as we remember in so many different ways – let us remember that our past informs our waiting and our living - but most importantly it helps us understand who we are. – and as such, like the bridesmaids in the parable we are called to be awake and alert – to use our knowledge to make a difference now; and not waste the time or gifts God has called us too.
Amen

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3459