

Sermon for Remembrance Sunday 12th November 2017

Gospel reading: Matthew 25: 1 -13

One of the most disturbing magazine articles I've read recently was by General Sir Richard Barrons, Commander Joint Forces Command 2013 -2016. Writing in the usually upbeat technology magazine Wired UK the piece was headed "War is coming – and innovation will win".¹ There was a little helpful tag on the page – "Opinion". There was honesty in the piece in one way about war: that war is brutal, and a clear recognition that war is a lived experience now for millions of people in the world today – for them war has come - and therefore in a connected world, those wars are a present reality, if not a lived experience, for all of us. The war in Syria has influenced us in quiet Wokingham as we have welcomed refugees for example. I'd like to read, without endorsing it all, what General Barrons has written about the reality of war :

"War is war, a feature of human existence as old as mankind itself and unchanging in its essential nature: brutal, feral, unbounded and irrational in how it plays out, even if rationally committed to at the outset. It is about killing and destroying faster than the enemy, and likely driven by red mist more than good judgement, until the will to fight is depleted by blood, devastation and a widespread sense of futility. This is the lived experience of millions today, from Aleppo to Mosul to South Sudan. This is the threat hanging over the Korean peninsula, and even over Europe and Russia amid testy relations."

The article goes on to be basically a call to the Western allies to get moving better and faster in applying the best technology and the best resources and brains to get ahead of competitors and build competitive military edge; to quote him "to gain decisive advantage in the most challenging of competitions on Earth".

I guess you can see why I describe it as a disturbing piece. It's not written by a young tabloid journalist looking for a reputation. Here is a senior military figure saying that we should be putting the best of our efforts as a society in to making sure we are ready for war because war will come inevitably. Elsewhere in the piece he appears to suggest that the peace between the Western democracies that we have enjoyed since the mid-20th century is a temporary blip. It's not a very inspiring message – is it honesty or is it self-interested doom- mongering? Is it a realistic vision of the world's future or is it faithless and lacking in hope?

As we stand here on Remembrance Sunday recalling the terrible price paid by so many of our citizens in the world wars and other major conflicts of the last century, and honouring their memory, we will re-capture in our readings and prayers the spirit of hope that came out of the end of that period of world crisis 1914 to 1945. It was a spirit of determination to create a better world and hope that it can be done; efforts to develop better ways of living together and sharing the world's resources among the nations; institutions, laws, treaties, agreements and policies put in place to promote the rule of law between as well as within nations; democratic and human rights, freedom of expression and a free press, separation of powers as between executive and judicial arms of the state, professional and democratically accountable armed forces, equalities before the law regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or different abilities; freedom from political tyranny, the end of colonial control of one sovereign people by another, free and fair trade with freedom from monopolies and free-loading; a meaningful acceptable expression of fair and equitable access to the nation's economic growth for all citizens. All of these are examples of instruments of peace rather than war.

These instruments of peace like the United Nations, international trade agreements, humanitarian organisations, or the international treaty on climate change are necessarily secular, because they reach to the whole world, across all its many different cultures and faiths; some would say that

¹ Wired UK edition (November 2017 p33)

they have been developed in spite of, not because, of faith. Increasingly in western culture faith and spirituality have tended to be kept as a private concern, and yet it is also true that what motivates and sustains the commitment by many individuals, groups and communities of people to make the world and their local communities a better place to live for all as well as themselves only, is hope and compassion; and their inner hope and compassion may often be grounded in, and nurtured by, the vision and values, the emotional and moral support they receive, from the great faith traditions and communities of spiritual wisdom in the world.

Our gospel reading today – this parable of Jesus – highlights, from a scenario of wedding customs very familiar to the first audience, the difference between foolishness and wisdom. The bridesmaids are to be prepared with their lights when the bridegroom arrives. This is about being prepared – being ready and able – to take part in the party when the groom comes – being prepared for a time of joy, peace and life in abundance. The foolish bridesmaids fail to pack enough oil for their lights. The bridegroom is delayed and those bridesmaids are no longer ready when he arrives to enjoy that celebration. Their foolishness consists in taking for granted that the bridegroom will arrive and the party begin when they expect it. The wise bridesmaids do not take the bridegroom's arrival for granted. They make provision for delay by packing extra oil. They are ready to party but wise enough to know that it may not come as and when they think it will.

In the bible a wedding feast symbolises God's kingdom of joy, peace and righteousness. The biblical Christian vision is that this is the destination towards which we are called to move. That's what this section of St Matthew's Gospel is all about. It's meant to inspire hope and faith in God's purposes - the unstoppable, unswerving, gracious and patient intention of God to bring all things and all people to completion and wholeness.

The situation which faced the Christians to whom Saint Matthew's Gospel was written maybe 30 years after the resurrection, was the delay as they saw it of the return of Jesus. Bible experts today are divided about whether Matthew's gospel was written before or after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in AD 70; but either way there had been much unrest and apparent signs of the times but still no sign of the Son of Man returning in clouds of glory. So the message of Matthew to the readers of his day is that it is not for us to know the time of Jesus' return, symbolising the longed for time of peace and justice and freedom, there will be many setbacks on the way, but still we should rather always be prepared for, be ready to participate in, that time of peace and joy when it comes.

A Christian understanding of peace and justice in communities and between communities may be as a gift to be sought for and prepared for rather than taken for granted. And so I might agree with General Barrons that the reign of peace and democracy cannot be taken for granted. War can come if we are not careful. Christianity and the biblical witness is by no means unrealistic about the capacity of humans to wreak destruction and cruelty on each other. But I suggest a different response based on a different vision - the biblical witness to Christian hope. It is that we should prepare most of all for sustainable peace, prosperity and justice for all. This is rather the most challenging race and victory we should pursue with all our best resources and determination. To stop war. Let me end by sharing with you this heartfelt plea from Pope Francis;

“Dear Brothers and Sisters, Never resort to war! Never war! Above all, I think of all the children who are robbed of their hope for a better life and a decent future. Killed children, wounded children, mutilated children, orphans, children who play with remnants of war, instead of toys. Children who don't know how to smile. Please stop! I ask you with all my heart. It's time to stop. Stop it please!”

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