

Bishop Richard Harries Sermon

Remembrance Sunday 2023

St Mary's, Barnes

We live in sombre times. It is not possible to shut ourselves off from the terrible suffering in Gaza and Israel, the trench warfare in Eastern Ukraine, and so many other continuing conflicts round the world, Sudan and Yemen amongst them. The suffering hangs heavy on our hearts. Against that dark background some words of Jesus light up the sky. 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God'. (Matthew 5.9)

In the Bible the word peace is problematic, because as often as not the writers are concerned to expose a false peace. Or, as it was said elsewhere about the Roman imperial project 'They make a desert and call it peace'. That is why in the Bible true peace is inseparable from Justice, and the great Hebrew word Shalom means life flourishing in all its aspects. When Martin Luther King was imprisoned for his work in the civil rights movement a group of white pastors wrote to him to tell him to stop stirring up trouble. He wrote back. 'Peace is not the absence of tension but the presence of justice'. That is the Biblical view.

That's why the armed forces when fighting in self-defence, in a genuinely just cause, can properly be understood as peacemakers, and today we honour those who lost their lives in the service of our country, defending the values by which we seek to live.

But after World War II the world sought a better way of making peace between nations and in 1945 the United Nations was founded. It has a security council and currently 12 peace keeping operations round the world. It is obvious from the state of the world that the UN has not succeeded it doing what was originally hoped but it is vital that we still have it in place and support it. Supporting the work of the UN

and other bodies working for reconciliation in the world is also the work of peace making.

Individuals can also make a significant contribution. Justin Welby, even before he was Archbishop was heavily involved in the work of reconciliation and he has visited Nigeria some 75 times in connection with Muslim and Christian tensions in the North. A friend of mine in Georgia, Archbishop Malkhaz Songalushvili has built a peace cathedral in the capital, Tbilisi, in which Jews and Muslims as well as Christians have a sanctuary to worship.

Individuals can make a difference-often much nearer home and in less dramatic ways. Quarrels are not confined to states, they occur locally, in neighbourhoods, in homes, in families. And there is sadly, a desire in too many human hearts to make mischief rather than heal breaches. When we hear of a row, an estrangement, what do we find in our own heart? A twinge of delight in stirring it up or a desire to find a way to overcome the breach and bring healing?

And it is in the heart that peace begins. Jesus also said. 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you.' (John 14.27) This is the peace that comes through living at one with God; through the assurance that God cherishes us and values the contribution we can make. From this peace comes the grace to be a peacemaker in whatever way possible. 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.'

In one way or another we are all called to be peacemakers. And it is through being a peacemaker we honour those who died in the service of our country that there might be true peace-in our homes and neighbourhoods, and as citizens meeting the challenges of our time.

The Corrymeela community in Northern Ireland is dedicated to making peace in that troubled part of the UK. I end with the prayer they use.

Show us, good Lord

The peace we should seek,

The peace we must give,
The peace we can keep,
The peace we must forgo,
And the peace you have given
In Jesus Christ our Lord.

Richard Harries