

Remembrance Sunday Sermon on 12 November 2023 at All Saints' Church by Rev. Alan Stewart



Two minutes

Two minutes' silence; 120 seconds of permission to stop; to pause in all this noise and busyness and distraction.

Two minutes to remember; to recall countless lives given and taken.

Two minutes to reflect on both the light and the darkness of this human race, the potential in every one of us to both create and destroy.

Silence because there are no words with which to pay appropriate respect.

Silence because we are left speechless at both the sacrifice and the atrocity of war.

Silence because in silence there is solidarity and connection.

In those two minutes of silence, we observed earlier, I wonder what was going through your mind?

Pride, perhaps, at the courage and selflessness and compassion of so many.

Sorrow, probably, at the loss and senselessness of wars, then and now.

Despondency, maybe, because our race seems incapable of learning from our past.

Empathy, I hope, for the plight of others, then and now. Maybe for a moment we imagined what it must have been like in those trenches or on the beaches; or what it is like to patrol war zones, run in fear for your life; live with a soundtrack of gunfire and dropping bombs.

I imagine that somewhere in our thoughts were the heart-breaking and appalling conflicts and wars that continue to rage in Ukraine, in Israel/Palestine and other more forgotten places.

The events of recent weeks in the Holy Lands have been devastating to witness. Never has a conflict looked more hopeless.

And yet, within this unfathomable waste, we hear of moments, glimpses of what we might dare to call hope. Moments such as a released 85-year-old Israeli hostage turning to her masked captor, taking his hand and speaking the Hebrew word for peace; 'Shalom'.

The Hebrew understanding of shalom is so much more than an absence of conflict. Shalom is wholeness, completeness, safety. It's a peace within ourselves, with others, and with whatever Higher Power we can believe in.

Like that elderly Jewish woman, we all long for peace. True and lasting peace of course is never made on a battle field or around a conference table. True peace is always first forged in the human heart. In other words, peace always begins with me.

Any peace I long for, pray for today, always begins with the choices I make; those daily decisions to meet hostility and hatred with respect and forgiveness; in those moments when I chose to walk a mile in the shoes of another; at those times when I allow the Peace of all peace to silence my own inner turmoil and insecurity with its gentle and unconditional love.

Without that, our natural instinct is for revenge; hurt me, I'll hurt you. And yet refusing to forgive always hurts both you and me;

incarcerates us both. Let's face it, forgiveness is often a costly thing. It involves absorbing our need for an apology or for justice or for revenge.

A favourite writer of mine, Brené Brown, says:

"To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. It is also a process that does not exclude hatred and anger. These emotions are all part of being human. You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things: The depth of your love is shown by the extent of your anger. However, when I talk of forgiveness, I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person. A better person than the one being consumed by anger and hatred. Remaining in that state locks you in a state of victimhood, making you almost dependent on the perpetrator. If you can find it in yourself to forgive, then you are no longer chained to the perpetrator. You can move on, and you can even help the perpetrator to become a better person, too."

There was once a man who spoke the unthinkable; 'Love your enemies'; a man who while hanging breathless on an enemy cross, prayed 'Father, forgive them'.

And that prayer stretches through time to space to this time and place. Christians believe that forgiveness has happened; that all we regret, and every enemy we have, including the one within, is forgiven. And if that's true, as the writer Barbara Brown Taylor says, then 'that is the end of it, the end of all the blaming, all the scape-goating, all the getting-even, all the revenge. He died to put an end to all of that. He volunteered to be the last victim, so

that his followers would never make victims out of anyone else again. He even gave us a prayer to pray if we should ever find our own hands hammered down: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

God, I know, is often blamed for starting wars or for going AWOL in the midst of them. I imagine there are many who are asking themselves today, 'Where is God in Gaza?' And my only response is that he is where he has always been... in the thick of it, whispering comfort to the broken, giving courage to the exhausted, weeping with the grief-stricken, and please-God, softening the hearts of the powerful and the angry and the brutalized so that they might imagine another way, that they might find the grace and the desire to forgive. With the prophet Micah who centuries ago dreamt of machine guns being fashioned into hospital beds and drones made into tractors, may we all work within ourselves, with family, with friend, with stranger and with enemy, so that the world might know something of that wholeness some call shalom, some salaam, and others, peace.