

Sermon on Remembrance Sunday, 9 November 2025

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Colossians 3. 9-17 & Matthew 5. 1-12



Silence & peacemaking

On the website of the Imperial War Museum, you'll find a sound recording of the actual moment ceasefire was declared on Armistice Day 1918. Recorded on the eleventh day of the eleventh month at the eleventh hour, a barrage of heavy gunfire gives way to a silence where all that can be heard is birdsong.

Silence. This morning, we will stand for two minutes in silence; 120 seconds of sacred 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 both to create and to 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.

Silence helps us to connect both with our shared humanity, and with what lies deep within *us*. In silence we hear ourselves.

Silence, we know, can be good for us. It can calm the nervous system, reduce stress hormones, lower blood pressure, improve sleep. But it can also be scary.

In those sound archives you will also find the stories of those who were present at the ceasefire; “Well, do you know, strangely enough,’ one man recalls, ‘we wept, because the silence was so awful. You see, we’d been used to the noise of guns, all day long, all day long, all day long... it was so strange, to have silence.”

A strange and awful silence.

Many returning home from war, of course, with what we now know as PTSD, carried with them that awful silence, refusing to speak of the horrors they’d experienced. A coping mechanism; a way, too, perhaps, of shielding those at home.

Some of us are more comfortable with silence than others. Some of us need noise; the TV, the radio, our phones. And that's not wrong.

Sometimes, however, it's a coping mechanism; a distraction to avoid the things we can't or don't want to face.

Monks and mystics understand this. They have an expression: 'Your cell will teach you everything'. The cell is silence.

Last summer, as I've previously mentioned, I spent five days on silent retreat, by mistake.

Silent meals, no TV, no music, no distraction. Just me, myself and I. And at first it was wonderful, letting go of all the responsibility you don't know you're carrying until you put it down. And then boredom kicked in. And then frustration. And then... some stuff I'd carefully suppressed began to rise up in the silence; uncomfortable stuff, unresolved stuff, some painful stuff.

In the silence I began to hear myself. I began to see some of what I still needed to make peace with.

Famously, Jesus once said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will be called children of God'.

Peacemaking, as we know, begins with making peace within ourselves; with our past, with those things that we too often distract ourselves from. And when we do this, well then, that

peace spreads because we begin to see that others, *every* other, including those who have wounded us, is also a child of God.

Last Remembrance Sunday, I shared with you a little of my own story, my own trauma of losing a brother to violence in my homeland in the North of Ireland.

This summer, as you probably know, I visited a road in Belfast I've never been to before. The Falls Road has always felt like a no-go place for Protestants like me. It is, for many, the heartland of Irish Republicanism and the scene of historic conflict and trauma for the Catholic community who live there.

I hope it's okay to share again what happened. I'll be preaching at All Saints later and it felt right to share this there.

Barbara, a longtime resident, was our tour guide. She was about my age, full of fun and laughter, and she spoke powerfully and vulnerably about her own experience of growing up in the Troubles. As we walked the streets lined with political murals and visited the Peace Line, that barrier that still separates this community from their Protestant neighbours in the Shankhill, Barbara spoke of her own costly journey of making peace with her past and the work of reconciliation she was involved with. She mentioned that the one group of people she could not yet forgive were the RUC, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the then police force of N Ireland. Officers had victimized and shot members of her family at close range with plastic bullets. As I listened, I felt torn and conflicted. You see, my brother was in the RUC and the IRA killed him because he was, in their eyes, a

'legitimate target' in their struggle against what they experienced as a foreign occupation.

Barbara and I took a few moments away from the group, to walk and talk. And I shared with her that traumatic chapter of my family's story. And as we walked and talked and listened, that whole 'us versus them' thing just disappeared. This was two wounded people meeting on the common ground of human trauma. And before we parted, Barbara asked for a hug. And in that moment, near that Peace Line barricade, another little wall came down and a kind of peace broke through to us both.

In this silence of Remembrance Sunday, may we take time to hear ourselves; to allow what's unresolved or damaged in us to surface, knowing that just as God (however you understand that word) was and is in the trenches and killing fields of war, so he is also with each one of us in whatever battleground of the mind or heart we find ourselves in. This is a God who knows from personal experience what trauma is; a God who is in the business of breaking down barricades and building peace; a God who is, I believe, here... in this moment, in this and in every silence.