

Remembrance Sunday 2020

Revd Steph Nadarajah

1 Thessalonians 4:13-end; John 14:1-6

As I stood not far from here, last year, I suggested that we were standing on the brink of a new horizon in our national life, following three years of being dominated by a ruthless and divisive politics. It seems now – looking back – that what were we actually standing on was the edge of a precipice that none of us could possibly have imagined.

As we find ourselves in another national lockdown, after nine of the most difficult months in our lives, today's commemorations inevitably look and feel starkly different. Our public gatherings are reduced to a symbolic few; churches like ours that could hold hundreds of people are closed; and mingling beyond our own households is forbidden by law. And we are reminded, through our physical separation, of those other rituals of grief and loss that we may have missed, or experienced in a different way, this year. It is estimated that 9.7 million people haven't been able to attend the funeral of a loved one as a consequence of national restrictions – and that number is only increasing. We are constantly being reminded that we are still living with a level of threat to ourselves and our society that hasn't been seen for several generations.

It's no wonder that our politicians have turned to the language of war to describe the challenges that we face, nationally and globally. It has been said, at various times over the last year, that 'Britain is at war with an invisible enemy'; that Covid-19 is a 'physical assailant, an unexpected and invisible mugger'; and that 'this is a fight in which each one of us is directly enlisted.' (David Sharidatmadari, *'Invisible mugger: How Boris Johnson's language hints at his thinking'*, 27.04.20, www.guardian.com) It's not at all surprising, when you think about it: what better way to galvanise the nation and to channel the collective, wartime spirit that has served us so well in the past? One commentator has written, 'The martial rhetoric is part of the national psyche, reflecting a shared mythology that Britain instinctively reaches for in a crisis.' (Ben Macintyre, *'Coronavirus: We're facing an invisible enemy in this war on the home front'*, 20.03.20, www.thetimes.co.uk)

Whether or not these metaphors are seemly in the circumstances is perhaps a debate for another day. But what this shows us is that the language we put around things shapes our experience of them. And that is as true of today as it is of the other rituals of grief and loss in our lives. On Remembrance Sunday we try to put words around the experience and the cost of war, even as the numbers who served in the World Wars diminish, and the memory of those recent conflicts – Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria – is overshadowed by more pressing news. And, all the while, our armed forces continue to serve abroad, and to put their lives in danger today.

The words that we'll want to put around the experience and the cost of war will differ, depending on where we stand. There'll be those amongst us today who will have seen active service of some kind; those who have a family member or friend who has served in the armed forces, or alongside them; those whose lives have been affected by the outbreak of war or conflict in their homeland; those who commemorate today because that's what they've always done, and because it feels like the right thing to do. The words we'll want to use may be words of gratitude, words of lament, words of anger, words of longing, words of hope, words of peace.

The invitation, as we gather as a community today, is to wrap *God's* words around the experience and the cost of war, even in the midst of our struggle with that other physical assailant we know as Covid-19. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul acknowledges both the reality and the seriousness of death and describes a vision of the end times in which we shall all be gathered up together: recreated and reunited. Whether or not you can subscribe to the details – some of which might feel like pure fantasy – Paul reminds us that God has a dream for us, and for the whole of creation, which is beautiful. It's a recurring theme in the Bible, and there are echoes of a passage from Jeremiah, written during a time of national disaster – the Babylonian exile – in which he offers words of encouragement to his people: 'For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.'

That kind of positivity might feel hard to hold onto right now. Most of the people I've spoken to over the past few weeks are feeling anxious, angry, fearful or depressed. Many are stretched beyond their capacity to cope and remain hopeful. But sometimes, it's only when the things we take for granted are out of reach that hope can take root and turn into something more than shallow optimism.

Today, as we find ourselves at a loss without the rituals we usually depend on, perhaps we can feel something of the pain of Jesus's own friends, who, in this Gospel reading from John, were faced with the devastating prospect of living life without him. They begged him to tell them where he was going, and how they might get there. But it wasn't really ever about a place, as such. What Jesus was talking about wasn't a destination. It was the promise of God's relational presence with them – the promise of God's love with them – in whatever situations they had to endure. And, over time, they realised that their community would make the love and presence of God visible in the world. Community would be the thing to give substance to their hope. Community would be the means by which God's dream for the future would be pulled into the present.

Whatever sorrows and losses we are bearing today, and as we contemplate the twin disasters of war and pandemic, may our hope grow out of knowing the reality of the situation we are in. And may we be reminded, today, that hope is not just something that happens to us, but something that we can participate in.

And so let the words of this Blessing for Hope, from Jan Richardson, challenge and console you, in equal measure.

So may we know
the hope
that is not just
for someday
but for this day-

here, now,
in this moment
that opens to us:
hope not made
of wishes
but of substance,

hope made of sinew
and muscle
and bone,

hope that has breath
and a beating heart,

hope that will not
keep quiet
and be polite,

hope that knows how to holler
when it is called for,

hope that knows how to sing
when there seems little cause,

hope that raises us from the dead-

not someday
but this day,
every day,
again and
again and
again.

(Jan Richardson, 'The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief', Wanton Gospeller Press, 2020')

Amen.