

## A Better Vision

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church  
on Remembrance Sunday, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2010, by Dr Tony Lemon

Isaiah 2, v. 4 (part) '*Nation shall not lift sword against nation, nor ever be trained for war*'  
John 15, V. 10 (part) '*Dwell in my love*'

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When my parents retired to Norfolk in the late 1960s, I was surprised to find our village church fuller on Remembrance Sunday than any other day of the year. In Britain today, 65 years after the end of World War Two, some two-thirds of the population still buy poppies. David Cameron and his delegation in China reportedly insisted on wearing poppies, despite Chinese sensibilities about the opium wars. The sheer scale of sacrifice in the two great wars of the last century makes them unique shared experiences in the history of our nation, experiences which have not lost their freshness, and which continue to have meaning for many who were born after 1945. This time of remembrance, though not part of the Christian calendar, is one which brings together our nation in a Christian context – and one which for many people may be one of their only contacts with the church this year.

Remembrance is also a time for taking stock. How should we feel today, if our country made the demands on us that were made on those who fought in earlier generations? Willingly or reluctantly, bravely but often no doubt with sheer inward terror, they fought for *us*, for the generations to follow. In the midst of our current economic troubles and our preoccupation with the effects of economic cuts, remembrance of wartime, both conditions and sacrifices abroad, perhaps serves to give us a sense of perspective. The two great wars brought people together, in a greater sense of community, locally and nationally, than they normally found in peacetime. We are remembering today sufferings and hopes which were *shared*. This makes us ask what sort of community our nation has become today. How far can we put aside political differences and rejoice in our togetherness, in shared values and a common sense of purpose? Have we used the post-war decades to move closer to social justice? Have we removed barriers or raised them – or others – anew? And what should be our role in the wider world? – have we been true to the vision of 1919 and 1945? Beneath these questions is another, unspoken, question, especially for those still alive who have lost loved ones in time of war: what would those whom we are remembering today think if they could come back and see for themselves?

They died for a better vision: a vision of lasting peace and a better world. This is something for which humanity is constantly striving, but constantly disappointed. Isaiah chapter 1 refers to 'the faithful city' and returns to this theme in the early verses of chapter 2 which we have heard this morning. The vision of a world without war, where people will 'beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks', has captured the imagination of many political and religious movements – pacifists, Quakers, nuclear disarmers and others. Isaiah's verses focus on the city of Jerusalem, and exiles of all ages have looked to these words for inspiration – as in the hymn 'Blessed city, heavenly Salem'. The hope that the nations will one day accept the word of the Lord surfaces in many biblical passages: Nebuchadnezzar, destroyer of Jerusalem, repents in the book of Daniel (4, 34-37); Cyrus, King of Persia, acknowledges the authority of the Lord (2 Chronicles 36, 23); and in Malachi (1, 11) we read the aspiration 'from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations'.

Always the vision has been disappointed. A few years after 1919 Britain was plunged into the great depression and the general strike. All too soon after 1945 came the realisation that an 'iron curtain' had come down across Europe, as Russia effectively colonised a sphere of influence which the West was forced to recognise: the Cold War had begun. In 1991, after the collapse of Communism, hopes were raised again, symbolised by the then President Bush speaking of 'a new world order' as the USA was able to put together an unprecedentedly wide global alliance to rescue Kuwait in the first Gulf War. Soon afterwards Francis Fukuyama gave such notions academic blessing with his quickly famous book 'The End of History and the Last Man', signalling the ultimate victory of liberal capitalism. A new era seemed to have begun, an era of breathtaking opportunity. Was a new vision of peace and justice in the community of nations truly within our grasp?

For some developing world peoples the end of the Cold War did at least spell the end of those 'wars by proxy' which Eastern and Western ideologies fought out in other countries illustrating all too well the words of an African proverb, 'when two elephants fight each other, it is the grass that gets trampled'. One by one conflicts seemed to be ending: Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Cambodia, South Africa – though others proved intractable, especially in Israel and Palestine, new ones arrived, as in Iraq and old ones resurfaced in new guise, as in Afghanistan. For Germany the end of Communism spelled reunification – a process which, for all Germany's economic problems, must surely be counted a remarkable success given the immensity of the task. For Eastern Europe it offered the chance – so eagerly grasped – to leave Russia and to join the rest of Europe, where the nations of eastern and central Europe felt themselves to belong.

But in retrospect it is difficult not to be disappointed with the way in which the nations have used the 'peace dividend' which we hailed at the time. The world does not seem to be a safer place, with multiple conflicts going on within nations, if less often between them; with the terrifying threat of nuclear proliferation among potentially unpredictable states; and with international terrorism posing an entirely different kind of threat, an enemy whom it is very difficult to fight. In 2008 Barack Obama's election victory led to another great surge of hope in many parts of the world: the fact that the world is now led by someone whose childhood included several years in Indonesia and whose family roots are partly in Kenya, where people celebrated his election, is hugely and excitingly symbolic – and in stark contrast to his predecessor's minimal experience of the world outside the USA. Yet since his election the political realities have asserted themselves, and Barack Obama like all world leaders has been forced to make compromises on both the domestic front and in the international arena.

Meanwhile, in the midst of all this, hardly any developed countries have achieved even the modest 0.7% of national income which is the UN target for development aid – though in the midst of current economic woes I imagine most of us, as Christians, will rejoice that our own government has finally committed itself to reach this target by the end of the present parliament.

Human hopes, in biblical times as in the present day, are constantly defeated because human nature has not changed. Not long ago I read the manuscript of a book on the geography of human conflict by a retired member of the Mansfield College Senior Common Room, Neville Brown. It brings together his experiences as a naval aviation meteorologist, a journalist in conflict zones and a professor of international relations. It is a breathtakingly ambitious book which goes back to the Miocene and reviews all major conflicts down the

ages. Reading it left me with a sense of the sheer inevitability of conflict, as if it is programmed into our genes. The book's perspective is one of strategic studies, with a call for what the author calls 'survival studies' – it offers no recipe for the ending of conflict, calling only for an intensified search for a survival strategy.

Perhaps the most hopeful development in the twentieth century, and one which in no small way arose from the appalling consequences of the two great wars, was *the realisation of human frailties and the attempt to control them through international law and international action when needed*. We know the limitation of these things in practice – they have been all too apparent in the Congo, a country where five million of people have died violently in a decade, the greatest number anywhere since 1945. But at least the *recognition of our weakness and our need* is a beginning, taking us into much more hopeful waters than all the preceding centuries where, essentially, might was right.

What is true for the nations is true for ourselves. The search for inner peace cannot even begin until we recognise our own frailties. In the world, Jesus told his disciples, we shall have trouble: in Him, and Him alone, we may find peace and, in the words of today's Gospel reading, 'Dwell in my love'. By this Jesus means much more than a sheltering protection. This love is a pervasive atmosphere in which we may dwell, and which we may breathe, so that it becomes the very breath of our lives. This is the vision we shall never fulfil by wars, and we do well to remember that no war, no conflict, is part of the heavenly vision: to the extent that it may be just, that in itself is a measure of human weakness. Every war, like every family conflict, re-crucifies Christ. The heavenly vision of peace, and ultimately our earthly visions too, are fulfilled only by peace in human hearts. It is not the peace of sleep, but a peace which leads to human action for a better world.