

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Remembrance Sunday 14.11.21

Collect

God, our refuge and strength,
bring near the day when wars shall cease
and poverty and pain shall end,
that earth may know the peace of heaven
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'

Sermon

Recently I have been reading a book about army leadership by Lieutenant Colonel Langley Sharp, head of the Centre for Army Leadership at Sandhurst. The book's title is: "The Habit of Excellence: Why British Army Leadership Works." It's a fascinating read. From a personal perspective, it has increased my respect for our armed forces and challenged many of the simplistic notions that I held. Speaking about respect for hierarchy, Sharp explains: "Such structures and systems are designed not to restrict but to enable, providing a framework within which leaders can think for themselves, act on their initiative, and consider the need to challenge or disregard, when appropriate, the order they have been given." This is anything but blind obedience.

Sharp begins by setting out the modern army's history, established when the monarchy was restored under Charles II in 1660. As with so many enduring institutions, history is both blessing and curse. So much has changed over the centuries. Not only is modern warfare unrecognisable from the conflicts of the past, but attitudes have undergone countless evolutions. From bought commissions and an assumption that leaders were born, not made, the very existence of the Centre for Army Leadership at Sandhurst demonstrates a commitment in the current era to the training of recruits in leadership. Yet there are enduring values which remain unchanged, and continue to be expressed in the British Army's values and standards.

As the title of the book suggests, developing habits is at the heart of army leadership training, with a focus on character and habit; knowledge; and responsibilities. Leadership is seen as encompassing who soldiers are; what they know; and what they do. This focus on character, both as individuals and part of a team, makes sense. Not only are soldiers being trained for circumstances that we cannot foresee as a result of rapidly advancing technologies, but unlike any civilian profession, "they consent to knowingly risk their lives in the service of ... comrades and, ultimately, the nation."

What struck me time and again as I read Sharp's book is that there are tensions and paradoxes running through all that he describes.

The modern army needs to be agile and able to change; yet there are enduring values which form a foundation on which the army is built. There is an art to being able to identify where change is needed, while holding on to what continues to matter.

Another tension lies in the regimental system itself. Every soldier joins a regiment, which forms a key aspect of that soldier's sense of identity and belonging. Soldiers learn about the history of their regiment, including hearing about those who have distinguished themselves in the line of duty. There is also some competitiveness between regiments. Yet ultimately there is one army. Soldiers are loyal to their regiments, but their loyalty to Queen and country comes first.

This morning's readings likewise hold together tensions and paradox. In those wise words of Ecclesiastes, we hear about the inevitability of change. Time has taken on a particular significance in our modern culture. Busyness appears to be a way of life. There never seems to be enough time. Yet, if we pause, we also recognise the wisdom of these words – that within our individual lives there are different seasons. These may include parenthood; career; caring responsibilities. And if that is true for us as individuals, it is also true on a larger scale. Whether we consider economic cycles or social changes, we experience different seasons throughout our lives and across generations.

Perhaps none of us would have anticipated the poignancy of those words about embracing and refraining from embracing had it not been for a global pandemic.

Change, then, is inevitable, yet the words of Jesus from our second reading remind us of what endures. No matter what season we are in, God's blessing will continue to rest on those who are poor in spirit; those who mourn; those who suffer persecution for righteousness' sake. The list goes on – and so does God's blessing. Whether or not we are living through a time of war, God's blessing rests on those who seek to make peace.

And that brings us to another paradox. On Remembrance Sunday each year – for over one hundred years – we gather to remember those who have given their lives for their country. We do so whether we are in a time of war, or a time of peace. While it is an annual commemoration with an enduring character, we experience it differently each year, depending on our own individual circumstances, as well as the national and international situation.

In the act of remembering, we do not assume that nothing changes, but rather we allow ourselves to re-visit significant events of the past in order to discover what they have to teach us today.

The central paradox in our act of remembrance is our desire to recognise and honour the sacrifice that has been made by so many individuals in conflict, while constantly longing for peace. Ultimately that is what brings us back year by year. Two commitments which might appear to be contradictory, yet actually sit side by side. Respect and honour for those who have given their lives, and the desire for a worldwide peace which would make such sacrifice unnecessary in the future.

We may doubt whether we will ever live to see the day when conflict is ended. Yet that doesn't stop it from being a valid aspiration. Ultimately it is the decisions of individuals that lead to peace or war. While the decisions of other people are beyond our control, we have our own choices to make – in small ways and sometimes not so small. And each one of those decisions forms part of a bigger picture of a world which might just be transformed.

Amen