

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Twenty fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Remembrance Sunday
Year A, 12 November 2023
Reverend Martin Johnson

Amos 5:18-24; Psalm 70; Thessalonians; 4:9-18; Matthew 25:1-13

There is a whiff of Advent in the air. Today's gospel reminds us of the need for readiness for the coming of the Bridegroom, the Christ, and the Kingdom of God. When St Paul wrote to some of the very earliest Christian communities in Thessaloniki all those centuries ago, they were struggling with this idea of readiness. They believed that Christ was going to return very soon, he would wrap up all things and the kingdom would be established...but he didn't show, the old folk began to die, and the community began to wonder. Paul's encouragement to those folk might strike us today as rather naïve, but his message is a simple one: your lives must be lived in hope.

Today here in Australia and around the Commonwealth we commemorate Remembrance Sunday, the day which marks the end of the Great War in 1918. The so called 'war to end all wars' was a term coined by HG Wells which is now used rather cynically and looking back over the last hundred years since the Great War, we can understand why. Every year it seems we are living in the shadow of a conflict somewhere in the world, this year is no different. It has been said that every war is different, every war is the same. We can easily see how every war is different, from the fields of Flanders to the skies over London, the jungles of Vietnam, the deserts of Afghanistan or the enclave of Gaza. But each is the same in that they are usually waged by autocratic or theocratic leaders.

But where does all this leave us, we who are committed followers of the prince of peace? We who are called to remember betrayal, that others might not be betrayed. First of course it should be said that there is no place for autocracy in the Christian imagination, indeed there is no place for theocracy given the nature of the God we worship revealed in Christ. We could become pacifists, perhaps some of you are; that is valid approach which has merit and scriptural warrant. The Old Testament speaks of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, it seems brutal to us, but it was a way of preventing the escalation of conflict. Jesus says we must turn the other cheek. Some of us are unable to embrace pacifism and we can find a scripture which speaks of protecting the vulnerable; what if it is someone else's cheek. How do we then protect the vulnerable from those dictatorial leaders and their pursuit of glory and ideology?

It is often said that to ensure peace you must prepare for war. The deterrent factor of nuclear weapons is an example of such thought. But what about preparing for the Kingdom, being ready for, in words of Amos, justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Can we prepare for such things in the face of the evil in our world? I think the answer must be yes because the alternative is too awful to contemplate. The danger is that we either take the view that all will be well, humanity will progress beyond conflict, or we take the post-modern approach and say 'shit happens' and throw our arms in the air! Neither of these approaches is satisfactory. We can be neither optimistic nor fatalistic, but filled with hope - the cross and resurrection as Paul reminds those first Christians prevents such thinking.

What we do need to recognise is that the problem of evil is not something we shall solve in the present world. Our primary task is not to give answers to impossible philosophical questions, but to bring signs of God's new world to birth on the basis of Jesus' death and resurrection and in the power of his Spirit even in the midst of the present age, in which there is conflict and war. Right, I can hear you say, how do we do that, how do we ready ourselves?

The current conflict in between Israel and Hamas, presents us with the most awful scenario. The actions by Hamas terrorists a month ago, were not acts of war, they were crimes, committed by criminals and needed to be dealt with as such. Unfortunately, the response by the Israeli government has been to declare war on the populace. I don't believe that we as Christians can

wholeheartedly support either side in this conflict. We must speak out wherever there is hatred, violence, death and destruction in any form.

The passage from Amos warns the Hebrew people what they can expect if they fail in their vocation to bring justice and right. It's a wonderful text filled with irony and reversal. It may be that Amos is warning Israel about going to war and the dangers that that brings. It is darkness, not light; he says it is as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? You might believe your cause is a just one... but perhaps not.

We are people who seek out and ready ourselves for the coming kingdom, which is as Paul says 'not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.' Justice must be a precursor to righteousness and peace.

Today as we recall 'the war to end all wars' we remember the millions of lives lost in that conflict and the millions subsequently lost in conflicts which have raged almost constantly in the world since that time. We commit ourselves to remembrance and in doing so we ready ourselves to face down violence and war. To seek out the signs of God's kingdom and in hope to embody those signs in our thoughts, words, and deeds, it is as both as simple and as complicated as that. Amen.