

Sermon: St Andrew's, Corbridge, Remembrance Sunday, 11 November 2018

Text: Micah 4. 1-5; Romans 8. 31-end

Theme: When the guns fell silent

May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When the guns fell silent.

There is a particular poignancy that this year the centenary of the Armistice should fall on a Sunday, thus uniting Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday. And I think for all us, that brief and yet profound two minutes silence, kept at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, was a deeply moving experience. And, and a century on from when the guns were hushed, silence seems the right response.

I think of the silence of contrast. It is hard for most of us to know or imagine the deafening noise of war. Exploding bombs and mortars, the screeching of the shells, the incessant spitting of machine guns, the hissing of gas, the agonised cries of the wounded, the shouting, the crying, the praying. And then, silence – enough, it is finished, it's over. I wonder how long it took before the birdsong was heard again over the carnage of the trenches?

And then, the silence of loss. Not only the Great War, but the Second World War, and every conflict since, bears a cost for those who lost their sons and daughters, their fathers, their family members, and closest friends and comrades. And not only lives that were given in service, but lives taken away, the civilian women, men and children, caught up in the violence of war and terrorism down to our own day. It is often in moments a reflective quiet that we remember exactly what loss means most profoundly.

Then, there is the silence of pride and respect. It is wonderful that we stop and engage in an act of corporate thanksgiving and imaginative engagement with the sacrifice of so many to defend our freedoms and to fight tyranny. My life, as someone fortunate enough to have been born after the two World Wars, has been immeasurably enriched and blest by the sacrifice of those who died, and those who were injured, many of them grievously. My own grandfather, who volunteered to return to his former work as a Chief Engineer in the Merchant Navy, was lost in 1941, defending the Allied Garrison on the Faroe Islands. He left a wife, and his two young daughters, one of whom is my mother. And that is just one family out of thousands upon thousands. And yet I'm so proud of him; I hope I would have

responded as he did. How we respect those who answered the call of Sovereign and country.

There is the silence of resolve. Remembering provokes us to seek to live lives that are marked by gratitude, and determination not to let their sacrifice be in vain. It inspires us to seek to unite rather than divide, to heal rather than to hurt, to reach out rather than to estrange. For surely we all long for the day foreseen by the Prophet Micah at a time of war six hundred years before Christ, when swords will become ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks, when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor learn war any more. The Great War was meant to be the 'war to end all wars'. Alas, how we wish it did when the guns fell silent.

And there is the silence of unity. It is the fact that we keep silence together that is so meaningful. I think it is brilliant that the Royal British Legion has so magnificently re-established Armistice Day in our nation. I've been in Durham Cathedral, the Central Station, in a café, in the middle of a lecture, at the eleventh hour of this day, and suddenly we stop, we stand still and build corporate as well as individual remembering. For none of us is solitary. We belong together. When the guns fell silent.

Here in Church, we bring all that we symbolise in silence into the great narrative of the Christian story. The Christian faith doesn't gloss over hatred, evil, human sin, pain, dying, sacrifice, because at its heart is the crucifixion and resurrection of the Son of God. Jesus had to die to overcome the destructive powers of evil and the crisis of death. His resurrection is the great hope we carry in our hearts that every precious human life is held by God, including the lives of those we remember today. We heard those great words of St Paul – that nothing in life or death is strong enough to separate us from the love of Christ – not hardship, or distress or persecution, or peril or sword. The lives of those we remember are not wasted or in vain because we have this conviction that before us is a Kingdom where God will make all things new. This has been the witness of this Church in the almost thirteen hundred and fifty years of its existence at the heart of Corbridge. The Christian faith is not escapist; it is tough enough to be proclaimed even in darkest night of the Western Front, for it speaks directly to our human condition where we need the promise and gift of salvation. Our history tells us that we cannot save ourselves.

It is not long until Christmas. In the unique atmosphere of Christmas Eve, at Midnight Communion, when our hearts are warmed, we sing the carol

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old.

It was the song of the angels with a message of peace from heaven and goodwill.

But in verse 2 comes the reality:

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The earth has suffered long,
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong.
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring.
O hush the noise, ye men of strife
And hear the angels sing.

But then the final verse, which echoes the hope of the Prophet Micah and the cast-iron conviction of St Paul:

For lo! The days are hastening on
By prophet-bards foretold,
When with the ever-circling years,
Comes round the Age of Gold,
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendours fling;
And the whole earth give back the song,
Which now the angels sing.

Listen! Can you hear the angels on this day when the guns fell silent?