

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Sermon

13th November 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

London, 1919: on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, “the first stroke of the eleventh hour produced an extraordinary effect. The tram cars glided into stillness, motors ceased to cough and fume, and stopped dead, and the mighty-limbed dray horses hunched back upon their loads and stopped also, seeming to do it of their own volition. Everyone stood very still. The hush deepened. It was a silence which was almost pain. And the spirit of memory brooded over it all.”¹ 11th November 1919, the first time a two-minute silence was kept so that, as King George V had requested, “the thoughts of everyone may be concentrated on reverent remembrance of the glorious dead”.

The scale of damage and loss in the First World War had been unimaginable. Every scientific and technological advance had been involved in making destruction more efficient and thorough: tanks and machine guns had replaced cavalry and rifles; planes had dropped bombs; chemical weapons had been extensively used. A generation of young men was nearly entirely lost, millions of soldiers on both sides, and countless civilians as well. To this day, battlefield landscapes still bear the scars. It seemed impossible and unthinkable that such tragedy could be repeated – this had been surely “the war to end all wars”.

It is true that the world has changed significantly since that first Remembrance Day. Yet, in some ways, it has also stayed very much the same. The twentieth century unfolded as a century of war, with sophisticated weapons of mass destruction being imagined, manufactured, and employed. Many more conflicts

¹ Manchester Guardian, 12th November 1919

reasserted the unwillingness of humankind to acknowledge its errors and learn from them.

There has probably never been a time when conflict has not existed somewhere in the world. In this morning's gospel, we heard Jesus himself acknowledging this seeming endlessness of conflict: 'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.'

Humankind stays true to the Latin adage "Si vis pacem, para bellum" – if you want peace, prepare for war. Even if some countries in Europe have known nearly 80 years of uninterrupted peace on their territory, war on a smaller or larger scale has been a tragic leitmotif of the past 100 years. Even amid the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, world military spending hit record levels, to reach over 2000 billion dollars last year. With the war raging on the EU's borders, I have little hope for even the tiniest portion of this spending to be redirected to tackle real threats to human existence such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pandemics, to mention but a few.

Aren't we caught in endless cycles of hatred, social unrest, conflict, and violence? How could peacemakers and all those who try to stand for what is good and just not be exhausted and discouraged? Besides terrifying news of wars and insurrections, the building blocks of our private lives can also be shaken and come tumbling down. We are overwhelmed, we try to get over illness, grief, disappointment, shattered hopes, in a world that seems to use only profit, greed and selfishness as its building blocks.

"Why don't you know how to interpret the present time?", Jesus Christ asks.

We do want to know how to read the signs of our time. As people of faith, we seek to learn the signs which would prove that God's Kingdom is at hand, and we pray daily: may your Kingdom come, may your will be done. As people of faith, we wait expectantly for God's justice to prevail on earth. But we live in the here and now – we can't do otherwise, can we? An honest assessment of the world around us is, perhaps, not always easy to reconcile with our faith.

Christ wants us to see in the present time God's work in our lives and in the world. Christ wants us to understand that, through this time, God leads us to his goal for humankind, the ever-growing communion with Him. Even in this present time, grace, pardon, peace and abundant life are freely offered.

Can we discern God's lovingkindness, even as we reflect, especially today, how much human propensity to conflict and violence is a sin? This sin leaves no one untouched. From this sin we all need to turn in repentance.

Such repentance can only begin with remembering. Peace will not come if we forget. I hope we can agree that the best way of honouring those whose sacrifice we remember today, and the best way of building a different sort of world, is to uphold a vision for peace beyond warfare and divisions. Peace can emerge and last only through our vigilance, our voice, our prayers. Peace can emerge and last only through our willingness to be part of God's Kingdom which will come perhaps slowly and almost unnoticed, but will come.

This was the vision which Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Catholic priest who was to become one of the most important palaeontologists of the 20th century had in the midst of the fierce battles of Ypres and Verdun in the First World War. He had chosen to serve as a stretcher-bearer and refused all opportunities for advancement, so that he could stay close to the soldiers. Teilhard de Chardin experienced at the scene of bitter toil "hope and deep mystery in the avalanche of conflict and sorrow" and felt there was a purpose and a direction to life more hidden and mysterious than history reveals to us.

In a letter to his cousin Marguerite, he wrote: "Above all, let us trust in the slow work of God. [...] We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability and that it may take a very long time. [...] Let us give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading us, and accept the anxiety of feeling ourselves in suspense and incomplete."

Later this morning, at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery in Mazargues, the two-minutes silence will offer space for God's still small voice to speak in our hearts. Our answer shall be hope: hope that God's holiness brings new life, beyond our imagination, beyond our grasping. Hope that personal or worldwide devastations are the places where God's saving work takes place. Let us remember that new life, resurrected life always begins in the darkest hour, when one can only say:

O God, make speed to save us;
O Lord, make haste to help us. (Ps 70:1)

Amen.