Remembrance Sunday - 9am St John's

Hymns: organist's choice

Readings

1 Thessalonians 4:13-end

Matthew 25:1-13

I have had a blessed life.

I have not personally known war; for me death is an exceptional, relatively rare part of my daily life. Death has come to me, my family, and my friends in the 'normal' way – old age, the sudden, unexpected death of an accident or short illness, or the planned for, awaited death at the end of a long illness.

On the contrary, the men whose names we see on War Memorials and who we remember today, had what author John Harris, in his novel based on the Sheffield Pals, called 'a covenant with death'.

Across Flanders and Picardy these men experienced the closest to Hell that most human beings had ever witnessed. Indeed, as author Eric Remarque wrote in 'All quiet on the Western Front' :

"Bombardment, barrage, curtain-fire, mines, gas, tanks, machine-guns, hand-grenades – words, words, but they hold the horror of the world."

Away from combat, their days and nights spent in trenchs that were frequently full of water, complete with dysentery, gangrene, trench foot and other illnesses.

In World War 2 – fighting and dying in deserts and jungles, in cities and villages, in blistering heat and numbing cold, in the skies over Europe and Asia, on and under the oceans of the world. And the civilians;

bombed and buried in their homes and shelters or suffocated and burnt to death firestorms, or slaughtered in cold, clinical barbarity in the concentration camps of Europe.

And just as World War 1 wasn't the start of our bloodletting, WW2 didn't end it. Humanity hasn't stopped fighting; Korea, Malaysia, Viet Nam, Norther Ireland, Iraq, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Palestine, Ukraine. We still have people fighting and dying the world over – combatants and bystanders, men, women and children, young and old.

Death never takes a holiday, and never gives us a day off. It is desperately easy, in a world where millions can be obliterated in a split second, to feel hopeless and, within this context – OUR world – it's too easy to forget about hope.

Today's reading is an excerpt from Paul's letter to the Thessalonian Church. It is a valuable reminder for us, that those of us who live in Christ, have hope. Even when we confront death, when we mourn, we have hope.

Let me say that again. Despite everything, even in the face of death – we have hope.

Today I want to focus on that one four letter word,

Listen to what Paul has to say:

"*Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope."*

Unlike the rest of mankind, says Paul, we have hope, and in a world like ours, hope is an amazing thing to have. These days, hope can come over as a 'wishy

washy' sentiment. But for a Christian, hope is a much stronger word.

The biblical definition of *hope* is "confident expectation." In Romans and Hebrews we're told that Hope is a firm assurance about things that are unclear and unknown . Indeed, in the funeral service we hear the words *" in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ".* This hope is not some wishful thinking. Along with faith and love, hope is mentioned in Paul's letter to the Corinthians as an enduring virtue of the Christian life, and in his letter to the Colossian Church, Paul asserts that love springs from hope. And Paul's letter to the Romans states that Hope produces joy and peace in believers through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is big on hope.

Today's reading goes to on say :

"For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him"

Paul reminds us that Jesus died and rose again, and in doing so destroyed death. And that in the end of days, at the final coming of the Kingdom of God, those who have died as faithful Christians – will also be resurrected.

Although Paul says "*so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind* ", we're not being told to not mourn, or not grieve when we lose someone close to us. Jesus himself wept at the death of his friend. When a family member or friend dies, we will inevitably feel sadness and loss. We miss them being in our life; we miss their presence, their words, their touch.

Looking at the names on memorial walls, they were all mourned and missed by their families, their community. We can think about how their lives might have unfolded, how they would have lived had they returned from the wars in which they fought. It's right that we should grieve and mourn for those lives unlived.

Paul is NOT telling us not to mourn. He is telling us that we shouldn't be like non-Christians in our grief; for us, we have that hope that death for faithful Christians is but a sleep until the return of Christ. Yes – we will grieve, we will be sad, we will miss those who're gone ahead of us – but we have that hope.

General Omar Bradley, who commanded US troops throughout the allied invasion of Europe in the Second World War, said:

"Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount."

Today, two particular statements from Jesus's sermon stand out, as we consider Paul's thoughts on hope:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Those who mourn in Christ will indeed be comforted through the hope that Paul speaks of at the start of today's reading.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. Paul reminds us in Romans that hope produces joy and peace in Christians through the power of the Holy spirit.

Today, let us mourn and remember all those who've lost their lives in

conflict. But let us also become peacemakers, and may we all be comforted in the hope – that confident expectation, that firm assurance – that we shall one day be re-united with those who have gone on before us, proclaiming the victory of the crucified Christ over death itself.

Amen

Prayers

Father of all, remember your holy promise,
and look with love on all your people, living and departed.
On this day we especially ask that you would hold forever
all who have suffered during war, those who returned scarred by warfare,
those who waited anxiously at home,
and those who returned wounded, and disillusioned;
those who mourned, and those communities that were diminished and suffered loss.
Remember too those who acted with kindly compassion,
those who bravely risked their own lives for their comrades,
and those who in the aftermath of war, worked tirelessly for a more peaceful world.
And as you remember them, remember us, O Lord;
grant us peace in our time and a longing for the day when people of every language, race, and nation will

be brought into the unity of Christ's kingdom.
This we ask in the name of the same Jesus Christ
our Lord.

Lord, in your mercy ---- hear our prayer.

O God of the nations,
as we look to that day when you will gather people
from north and south, east and west,
into the unity of your peaceable Kingdom,
guide with your just and gentle wisdom all who take
counsel
for the nations of the world,
that all your people may spend their days in security,
freedom, and peace,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Lord in your mercy …. Hear our prayer.