

Remembrance

Wolves and Lambs

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

Throughout my ministry I have never conducted a baptism on Remembrance Sunday. The day seemed too sombre, the emphasis on sacrifice and suffering, the challenge of violence in a world that desperately needs peace. Until you realise that in every ongoing conflict, in Aleppo, Mosul, the refugee camps that overwhelm Lebanon and the borders of Syria, the dispersed Jungle camp in Calais, and the hidden hurts and plight of children and adolescents here in Edinburgh, there is no better day to celebrate a baptism.

In a world that is nervous, fragmented, ill-at-ease with itself, on this Remembrance Sunday, we not only call to mind the struggles of the Somme and Verdun, of El Alamein and the beaches of Normandy, of Korea and the Suez, of the Falklands, of Iraq, we call to mind what is happening here and now, where battles are fought not only with bullets and bombs, but with the ideologies of exclusion and fundamentalism, and the rhetoric of class-hate and racism and misogyny and homophobia. On a day like today, in the shadow of the US presidential election, where people who felt they had no voice, no hope, no presence voted in a way I find inexplicable, but maybe speaks to us of millions who feel they are ignored by a variety of establishments and elites who have forgotten how to engage with communities outside their bubbles of privilege, or power, or position.

We enter into a phase of the world's existence where everything seems unsettled and fragile, and many feel that life is more dangerous. And yet, this morning, a baptism. One of the most tender, gentle, inclusive, welcoming acts of love that is performed in the name of Jesus in Church. A vulnerable infant, totally dependent on the kindness of his parents and family and friends, brought into this sanctuary, this safe place, and welcomed into the radically diverse church community, and given a place, and promised protection and love. We struggled to get a date for this baptism because of family commitments – but I begin to wonder if the gentle hand

of God might not have been at work, reminding us of something profound about the promises of faith.

That in this present darkness and uncertainty and fear, God is still here. That in a time of economic uncertainty about Brexit, God is still here. That in a time when the well-being of our planet and its ecology seems, once again, in jeopardy because of climate-change deniers, God is still here. That in a time when social benefits for genuine people in need are squeezed, God is still here. That in a time when charities are having to pick up more and more of what should be statutory care for the elderly, children and the vulnerable in our society, God is still here. That in a time when the cries of the people are not heard, and the age of cynicism corrodes the soul of the body politic, God is still here.

At the heart of the story of faith is a Creator Who emerges even in the bleakest hour of human history to create new things. In every season of the human journey, no matter what the circumstance, personal and private, national or global, God is still here.

The Isaiah passage sounds like an election manifesto. Wolves and lambs feeding together rather than the former feeding on the latter. Lions becoming vegetarian. No hurt, no destruction; no weeping; no infant mortality; no premature death; blessings all round. Milk and mother's apple pie all round. Maybe someone could tell Theresa or Nicola or Jeremy or Donald.

But the world rarely feels like that. Promises made are not always kept. Grand schemes drawn up in election manifestos, by individuals and by political parties, often fail to make it from the drawing board to the place of decision and action. It all seems like so much hot air. And churches don't fare all that better. The pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die theology, or worse, the killing certainties of some faith groups that claim to have all the answers on some spiritual spread-sheet and if we would just do this, follow that, tick the right boxes, then God will certainly admit the righteous person into the holy club that is only for those and such as those deemed to have come up to scratch.

Whereas, the vision God unfolds, seems messy, challenging, hard to achieve, difficult to attain. It's not handed to us on a plate. It has to be worked for, sweated over, tried, tested, mixing failure with success. Or in other words, lived. The dream world God promises is something we, partnering God, must engage with and enter into and make happen.

On a day when we remember war, its triumphs and its failures, its sacrifices and its unresolved reality; on a day when we fret still about Brexit and the political situation in our own country, and the immense questions posed by the election of Donald Trump, God reminds us that God is still with us, through the baptism of a child. In the tense and the terrifying times, a little boy reminds us that the gift of life is still being given. In the caring and nurturing of that young life, and of any life, we are challenged to ask again, what kind of world do we want our young people and our old people to live in? What would human community look like with no weeping? What would human community look like if no one died before living out a lifetime? What would human community look like if the earth's abundant resources were shared? What would human community look like if everyone had access to opportunities that they had to work for, but could still access nevertheless? A human community where health care, and education, and safe neighbourhoods, and good water, and enough food, and environmental stewardship were thought through not for the limited benefit of a few, but the universal benefit of all?

The promises and challenges of faith make for uncomfortable listening. You don't, in fact, need to be a person of faith to hear what is being said. For those of us with faith the persistent breaking in of God's questioning keeps bringing us back again and again to things that are not right and what are we going to do about them? Christian faith, Jewish faith, Muslim faith, Hindu faith, Sikh faith, no faith. The great imperative of looking to what makes true community reaches across every divide, breaches every wall, silences every gun, confronts every ideology.

In the witnessing of a baptism this morning, on Remembrance Sunday, God asks each one of us once more, 'What if the world was different? What if there was economic justice? What if there was lasting peace? What if there was decent work for all? What if we shared more? What

if we listened to each other properly? What if we looked out for the lonely and the isolated. What if our horizons were further than our own selfish needs?’

Most of us slogging through complicated and often difficult days, with the sing-song voice of a doom-laden media in our ears, find it impossible to move beyond an understanding of the world as a survival-of-the-fittest kind of place. This is what we see and what we fear we will always be up against.

But it does not have to be this way. There is a newly baptised boy we saw today, on this Remembrance Sunday, and God invites and challenges us to do something about making and remaking this world into a better place.

We may feel the task is beyond us and not know where or how to begin. But we are able to give one drink of cold water at a time. We are able to bring comfort to the poor and the wretched, one act of mercy or change at a time. One book given, one friendship claimed, one covenant of love, one donation to a foodbank or clothing store, one moment of encouragement, one sincere apology, one hour listening to someone who is rarely listened to, one decision to stand against injustice, one declaration that every person is a child of God. Then we might very well find that wolves and lambs can lie down together, and the little world we live in can be transformed into the great universe of God’s mercy and love.

It won’t be easy. Jesus tells us that by our endurance we will gain life, but what a life that would be worth living.

Starting here, on this Remembrance Sunday, for the future of a little boy we saw baptised this morning. It begins now.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen