

Remembrance Sunday Evensong (10.11.19)

1 Kings 3: 1 – 15; Romans 8: 31 – end

Today is Remembrance Sunday. It's the Sunday above all Sundays when the preacher wants use their sermon to make a connection between the Bible readings and life as it's actually lived. Remembrance Sunday gets bigger and bigger each year – or at least that's the underlying trend from which we just need to smooth out the exceptionally large turn out last year for the centenary of the armistice that led to the end of the First World War. People who don't normally go to church, perhaps, turn out for services in greater numbers than at any time other than Christmas.

I'm being a bit mealy mouthed, using words like *perhaps*, and I deliberately spoke of people going to services without specifying that they were *church* services so I could include occasions like the service at the War Memorial in Bridlington this morning when there were perhaps a couple of thousand people

present. And certainly, if you take occasions like that into account, it seems to me Remembrance Sunday outnumbers Easter in terms of attendance and is second only to Christmas.

So Remembrance Sunday is an occasion when the preacher doesn't want to be spouting disconnected religious rhetoric, but wants to say that this is how what we've read speaks to the reality that people kill each other in war; and often they do so in horrendous and gratuitous ways.

And on such an occasion we have, this evening romans 8: 31 – end. Now this is a well know passage. It is full of great comfort. The final couple of verses are often read as “funeral sentences” as the coffin is being brought into church at a funeral – or at least that's what happens when we've not got a CD of a pop song being played. It's quite difficult to read the funeral sentences over the top of the strains of Ken Dodd, but when we can read them, the words “For I am

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convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers” etc., etc. “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus”, those words clearly give comfort to any grieving person whether they regularly go to church or not.

The difficulty is working out how angels and powers and height and depth relate to military conflict. It helps when you realise that the people to whom Paul originally wrote the Epistle to the Romans actually believed this stuff. The heavens – in the plural, not just heaven – the heavens were very complex and confusingly inhabited places to first century spirituality. There were different layers of heaven ruled over by different bodies with a hierarchy of angels. And these things were very real.

They were as real as hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness and the sword were and still are. Paul is as convinced that those things can't separate us from Christ's love as much as he is convinced that

none of the whacky spiritual stuff can, or what to us seems like whacky spiritual stuff.

Let's just for a moment prune out the stuff about angels and rulers and powers and Height and depth, however familiar it might be, and concentrate on the list earlier on in the reading. What Paul clearly says is that systemic injustice cannot separate us from Christ's love. But make no mistake: “using the sword” is right up there in the list of systemic injustices alongside persecution and famine and all the rest of them.

So no-one can suggest that this passage gives us a licence to indulge in warfare any more than it authorises persecution. War is wrong. It is a sign of human failing. There is no doubt that Jesus always refused the option of a violent response. If being a Christian means our ethics must correspond to Jesus' – and that's not an outrageous suggestion – it seems to me the only conclusion we can come to is that we

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should all be pacifists *no matter what the cost*. It's not about whether pacifism works: it's about what is faithful discipleship. One scholar has said "Christian pacifism draws its sustenance from its roots, not its fruits."¹

But there are wars. And Paul thinks that even that shameful fact cannot separate us from Christ's love. It makes us realise how completely dependent on God's mercy we are and how careful we need to be not to be glibly presumptuous about that mercy. It's no good saying that war is wrong but it doesn't matter because God will be merciful and forgive us anyway.

As if the horrors of war weren't themselves sufficient, the track record of our inability to avoid war means that we should approach Remembrance Sunday with nothing short of abject shame and repentance.

Amen.

¹ John Howard Yoder [2013] "Revolutionary Christian Citizenship"