

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. (Psalm 19.14)

Today in the presence of representatives from nations that were drawn into the First World War we with people across the Commonwealth and indeed the world remember those who were killed, maimed, traumatised by the wars of the 20th century especially the two world wars that would shape the post world war order, as well as recent conflicts: to the post world war order belong human rights, the rule of law, free trade, free elections and the freedom of movement to name five pillars. Much of this consensus is under threat or being renegotiated through the ballot box. We are in a time of transition. The certainties which many of us came to take for granted especially in the West no longer hold in the way they did only a generation ago. The reasons for this are complex, while for many they are not self-evident, if they ever were.

Back in the spring I was reading Robert Burns's poem *Man Was Made To Mourn*, which includes the lines

Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!

What struck me having never read the poem before in its entirety were the two lines that immediately precede the lines just quoted

And man, whose heav'n-erected face
The smiles of love adorn, -

These two lines draw a beautiful and ennobling picture of who we are to be as humans and can be in our relationship to God and our neighbour. God adorns us with the smiles of love that our faces might heav'n-erected be. And one says to oneself quietly yes so it is or so it should be. I can see myself and others in these lines... But the poet does not allow the hearer to linger, as he abruptly and sharply proceeds to speak a hard truth.

And man, whose heav'n-erected face
The smiles of love adorn, -
Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!

Today's readings *The Farmer Remembers* and the verses from the Book of Lamentations both remind me of some of my companions over the last year and perhaps they have been your companions too as my heart weeps for those who have lost loved ones and homes, those who have fled and those who had to bury their dead. Those who night by night are being awakened to sirens fearing for their lives, hurrying to shelters, as well as those being held hostage. The reading from Lamentations speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem, the city of peace, by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. As we lament, as we mourn over the state of the world and especially the Near East and closer to home in eastern Ukraine, but also in many places not headlined in the news. The pictures of devastation, first of Mariupol and also in other cities in Ukraine and more recently the cities of Gaza, are etched on my mind reminding me of the bombing of Coventry or the city of my birth Hamburg and of the battlefields of the Western Front. The pictures of the rubble piled high and people walking through the rubble lined streets then and now speak volumes in their silent witness. Each city with its inhabitants longs to be a city of peace I posit. And thus Jerusalem stands for all the Jerusalems of each and every age in her longing and in her devastation. Every city is full of possibilities life and vigour, but also forever in danger of becoming places of death accompanied by listlessness and indeed forgetfulness, to which we are prone and which is the reason for this day.

The poem *The Farmer Remembers* takes us back to the Battle of the Somme. It reminds us that war continues to rage when the battle is done and an Armistice declared leaving a lasting mark on combatants for sure and others who grieve for what could have been, not allowing them or us to return to the untroubled innocence of a former life. I often

think of those men and women who experience war and especially combat and losing friends and comrades, but also being confronted with atrocities and horrors best left unimagined but which the savagery of the 7th October 2023 will not allow. How these must linger! How do they cope?

There's talk, and quiet laughter, and gleams of fun
On the old folks' faces.

I have returned to these:
The farm, and the kindly Bush, and the young calves lowing;
But all that my mind sees
Is a quaking bog in a mist - stark, snapped trees,
And the dark Somme flowing.

The Battle of the Somme is etched in our memories as one of the deadliest battles of human history fought by the armies of the British Empire and the French Third Republic against the German Reich between 1 July and 18 November 1916 either side of the river Somme in France. More than three million men fought in the battle, of whom more than one million were either wounded or killed. My imagination falters.

Today as we remember the fallen, those who were and are scarred by war, combatants and civilians, though it is tempting to only see the untamed monster in the collective us, we are to hold on to the first lines of the stanza of Burn's poem:

And man, whose heav'n-erected face
The smiles of love adorn, -

We are here to remember the atrocities of the 20th century and subsequent conflicts. We are here to acknowledge that we are deeply affected by the present conflicts seemingly so far away, but in reality so close in our global community and economy. We are here to acknowledge and remember the sadness in us (companions of another order) because of what others are going through and having to suffer and endure. But we also here to

remember that all of us are made in the image of God to reflect his truth and love, mercy and compassion. There is a better way.

We who remember and do so intentionally and with commitment not because it is a comforting or even inspiring tradition/ritual – we are here to remember we have a future and the seeds of that future are to be sown today, and many were already sown years ago perhaps because we remembered because we kept Remembrance Day or Remembrance Sunday because we pledged ourselves to serve God and one another “in the cause of peace, for the relief of want and suffering, and for the praise of your name”.

Staying with today’s poem *A Farmer Remembers* all of us are to be metaphorically speaking farmers. We must sow goodness and righteousness, truth and compassion. We must till. We must prune. We must cut back. We must harvest. We must allow the soil to regain her strength. Not everything can be affirmed. And much must be called out and condemned. Naive we must not be. The thistles they are many.

Despite the devastation, despite the destruction, despite man’s inhumanity to man the author of Lamentations, possibly the prophet Jeremiah, writes for posterity and as words of encouragement:

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’”

There is much to do. Let us keep on keeping on strengthened and warmed by the knowledge of the smiles of the love of God that adorn our heav'n-erected faces. **Amen.**