

Sermon: If my people.....

Reading: 2 Chronicles 7:14

Introduction

Remembrance Day is on the 11th November. We mark this occasion in our churches on the nearest Sunday to the 11th November and we mark this day with many congregations, churches and others services which would normally be taking place around the country today.

It is a solemn day set aside to remember all those men and women who were killed during the two world wars and other conflicts.

As we remember the service men and women who gave their lives in conflict for the freedom of others, we must also remember the civilians whose lives have also been lost. War changed considerably from WWI from fighting in fields to taking the conflict into the heart of cities and towns where many of these killed and injured now are civilians.

Armistice Day was renamed Remembrance Day after the Second World War.

Why the Red Poppy?

Scarlet corn poppies grow naturally in conditions of disturbed earths throughout Western Europe. The destruction brought about by the Napoleonic wars in the early 19th century transformed bare land into fields of blood red poppies, growing around the bodies of fallen soldiers.

In late 1914, the fields of Northern France and Flanders were once again ripped open as World War 1 raged through Europe's heart. Once the conflict was over the poppy was one of the only plants to grow on the otherwise barren battle fields.

The significance of the poppy as a lasting memorial symbol to the fallen was realised by the Canadian surgeon John McCrae in his poem in Flanders Fields.

The poppy came to represent the immeasurable sacrifice made by his comrades and quickly became a lasting memorial to those who died in WWI and later conflicts. It was adopted by the Royal British Legion as the symbol for their Poppy Appeal, in aid of those serving in the British Armed Forces, after its formation in 1921.

WW1

As the world ushered into a world war, many thought it would be over by Christmas. But as the weeks soon turned into months and the months dragged into years, the end seemed further away than ever.

The scale of WW 1 posed a massive challenge to the relatively small British army. Lord Kitchner, the newly appointed Secretary of State for War realised that the war would not be over by that first Christmas and warned the Government that the war would be decided by the last million men that Britain could send into battle. Conscription was politically unacceptable, so Kitchner decided to raise a volunteer army with a 'Call to Arms'.

Kitchner realised men would be more willing to join up and serve if they could serve with their friends, family and work colleagues. The method of recruitment proved a huge success in a pilot in Liverpool. Within days Liverpool had enlisted enough men to form 4 battalions.

A battalion is a combat unit of 500 to 800 soldiers. Three to five battalions, approximately 1,500 to 4,000 soldiers to comprise a brigade. Liverpool's success prompted other towns to follow suit. These battalion recruits were known as 'PALS'

Accrington PALS

One of the most famous PALS was from a small Lancashire mill town called Accrington. The recruitment strategy was so impressive that within 3 hours, 104 men had enlisted, brothers, cousins, friends and workmates enlisting together. Within 10 days a battalion was formed of 1,100 men.

Horribly within 9 months of recruitment on 1st July 1916 these young men found themselves on the front line, engaged in a fierce battle within the trenches on the Somme facing impossible odds in treacherous conditions.

The Accrington Observer and Times dated 8th September 1914 recorded.....

The Brigadier general H.C.Rees of the 94th Brigade said,

'The result of the H.E. shells, shrapnel, machine gun and rifle fire was such that hardly any of our men reached the German front trench. The lines which advanced in such admirable order, melted away under fire; yet not a man wavered, broke the ranks and attempted to go back. I have never seen, indeed could never of imagined such a magnificent display of gallantry, discipline and determination.

Out of the 720 Accrington Pals who took part in the attack 584 were killed, wounded or missing. On the first day, of battle the Somme, British casualties alone totalled 60,000.

Percy Holmes, brother of an original PAL recalled in the Accrington Observer and Times

'I remember when the news came through to Accrington that the Pals had suffered devastating losses, i don't think there was a street in Accrington or the surrounding district that didn't have their blinds drawn, and the bell at Christ Church tolled all the day.'

The First Two Minute Silence

This occurred first in London on 11th November 1919 - the Manchester guardian on the 12th November reported what happened.

'The first stroke of eleven produced a magical 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 if of their own volition.

Someone took of his hat and with a nervous hesitancy the rest of the men bowed their heads also. Here and there an old soldier could be detected slipping unconsciously into a posture of 'Attention' . An elderly women, not far away, wiped her eyes, and the man beside her looked white and stern. Everyone stood very still.....The hush deepened. It had spread over the whole city and become so pronounced as to impress one with a sense of audibility. It was a silence which was almost pain.....And the spirit of memory brooded over all.'

King George VI

Just under 20 years later King George VI gave his famous speech on 3rd September 1939 saying,

“In this grave hour, perhaps the most fateful in our history, I send to every household of my peoples, both at home and overseas, this message.....For the second time in the lives of most of us, we are at war.....”

The following year in May 10th 1940 Hitler unleashed a military onslaught on France and Belgium. Within days the British army - out manoeuvred and un-prepared - along with soldiers of other allied forces found themselves with their backs against the sea and hemmed in by the enemy fire. The German High Command boasted that its troops were proceeding to annihilate the British army. Total destruction of the British army seemed imminent. Winston Churchill braced himself for a speech to the nation which would speak of unprecedented military catastrophe which involved either the capture or death of 1/3 million soldiers.

Calling The Nation to Prayer

On 23rd May 1940 King George VI called for a national Day of Prayer that following Sunday. That the nation should turn their faces to the Lord God Almighty...

“If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven.....”

(2 Chronicles 7:14)

The nation responded. Long queues formed outside Cathedrals and churches. While the nation prayed, a further call went out for rescue boats to head across the channel. As churches were filled with the nations prayers, 800 small vessels took to the waters in a rescue bid. The outcome of a nations prayer was God’s blessing and this became known as the **Miracle of Dunkirk**.

The Miracle

In a national Broadcast King George had asked the people of the UK to turn back to God in a spirit of repentance and plead for divine help. Two events immediately followed.....

1. A violent storm arose over the Dunkirk region grounding the Luftwaffe which had been killing thousands on the beaches and keeping them pinned down. And then
2. An event which still confounds the historians, Hitler halted his advance and as a great calm descended on the channel, the like of which hadn't been seen for a generation, allowed hundreds of tiny boats to sail across the Channel in a mass rescue bid.

By the time Hitler renewed his call to advance 338,000 troops had been snatched from the beaches. Sunday 9th June was officially appointed as a day of National Thanksgiving. Young men who lost their lives on the battlefields of WWI and across the world the Second World War and other conflicts sacrificed everything for what they believed was right. The Dunkirk miracle reminds us of the importance of prayer and not just in times of National emergency but throughout our lives

Our call to prayer today is crucial

The Scripture I have used for today some will argue is taken out of context and as I always argue for reading Scripture in context, however we cannot dismiss that God calls His people to prayer and when they repent and turn their faces to Him, He is merciful. So this piece of Scripture is poignant for us today. ‘If my people who are called by my name shall humble themselves and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land’ **(2 Chronicles 7:14)**. What is interesting is the piece of Scripture which precedes, read 2 Chronicles 7:13 which is interesting for events happening around the world at the moment, for this is what it says,

“When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people...” (2 Chronicles 7:13).

It does seem as if there is a perfect storm brewing around the globe within nations. Linking with our reading from Chronicles we may not be aware of the devastation which is being wrought upon large parts of the world through locusts swarms. The world has been so preoccupied with Covid that world news is hardly being reported and international efforts which could have been mobilised have not materialised as nations went into lockdown.

In northeast Kenya they have been battling with a locust plague which formed a cloud three times the size of New York City. In Ethiopia more than 15,000 people had to flee their homes when a locust plague attacked and devoured everything (plant and crop) in its path. Swarms travelling from Pakistan have moved into India. Alerts were issued in South America in late June this year when a 9 square mile swarm entered Argentina from Paraguay and headed towards Uruguay. Swarms continued in the already battle torn Yemen extending to the Red Sea Coastal plains. The Locusts are decimating crops at a phenomenal rate leaving vast populations with food insecurity.

Locust swarms can travel unto 90 miles in a day and each locust can eat their own body weight in food every day. Swarms can reach up to 40-80 million in number per a square kilometre. A tonne of locusts (about 500,000 insects) eats about as much food in a day as 10 elephants, 25 camels or 2,500 people, destroying at least 200 tonnes of vegetation per day. It was estimated by the size of the swarm that attacked northern Kenya was made up of over 200 billion locusts, which consumed nearly 400,000 tons of food every 24 hours. That is equivalent to what 84 million people eat each daily!

Closer to home many of the factories and businesses producing much of the items we rely upon in the West have ceased production due to lockdowns which has impacted international trade. Is this why Wales took the steps to close down sales of non essential goods? A fridge/cooker/clothes etc are essential when your old ones are no longer functional!! If manufacturing stalls so will imports and exports, which will make it harder to source many of the goods we once took for granted. If this is not enough to cause us to be concerned consider the UK's ever increasing debt which is growing at £5170 per second, according to the national debt calculator. That works out to £38.945 per person or £66.985 per tax payer. How will this ever be repaid and to whom are we repaying?

Some ecumenists are expecting the current bubble in the stock market to pop which is currently over inflating prices of the stock market. Any of these issues is enough to cope with in ordinary times, but we are not living in ordinary times, these are extraordinary times. God did say He would shake the nations! - is this what we are now beginning to see? Bringing all of these major concerns together creates a perfect storm with an international monetary crisis.

If there was ever a time when the Nations needed to turn their faces back to God, its now. Remembrance is a time where we recall what went on in the past so we don't forget, let us remember all that God has done for us in times of national crisis. Now is not the time to close churches but to come to worship and turn our faces back to Almighty God once again, just as our forefathers and mothers did. Maybe God will relent and be merciful, bringing about a revival just as He did in the days of Wesley. To God be the glory. **Amen**