

Circuit service for November 14th 2021: Remembrance Sunday

Prepared by Jon Skeet

Welcome to worship today, wherever you are, whoever you are with, and however you are worshiping. Our worship of God is better for your presence. This service was prepared for Remembrance Sunday, but the act of remembering is not bound to one day or time.

We are called by our living God to acts of worship, prayer, contemplation, proclamation, and radical discipleship to further God's kingdom on earth. Reflecting on the past prompts change in the present, as a hope for the future, all in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our first hymn centres our worship on God, bringing praise and thanksgiving, but also reminding us of our duty of care for each other and our world.

Hymn

It is God who holds the nations in the hollow of his hand (STF705, HP404)

By Fred Pratt Green. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOrYR32pM2w> CCLI 2564436

1. It is God who holds the nations in the hollow of his hand;
it is God whose light is shining in the darkness of the land;
it is God who builds his City on the Rock and not on sand:
may the living God be praised!
2. It is God whose purpose summons us to use the present hour;
who recalls us to our senses when a nation's life turns sour;
in the discipline of freedom we shall know his saving power;
may the living God be praised!
3. When a thankful nation, looking back, has cause to celebrate
those who win our admiration by their service to the state;
when self-giving is a measure of the greatness of the great;
may the living God be praised!
4. He reminds us every sunrise that the world is ours on lease:
for the sake of life tomorrow may our love for it increase;
may all races live together, share its riches, be at peace:
may the living God be praised!

Prayer of adoration

May the living God be praised!

God of all creation, we worship and adore you, acknowledging you as worthy of all praise. We see your craft everywhere we look. When we look to the sky, we catch a tiny glimpse of the enormity of your universe. When we look to the ground, we see the teeming life you have created. When we look at each other, we see your image within, sharing your love for us all.

All our words are inadequate, God of all joy and hope, God of laughter and tears, God with us throughout our lives. We understand so little, but feel the warmth of your love for us. We respond to that love through service, kneeling before you and offering our lives in your service. We ask that you inspire our every action, through the work of your Spirit, that we may faithfully honour you and bring you the glory you deserve.

May the living God be praised!

Amen.

We say together the Lord's prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come;
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
The power, and the glory,
For ever and ever.
Amen.

Sharing memories

The theme of today's service is remembering – and then looking forward. That one word "remember" covers a lot of slightly different meanings.

We might *remember* that we've got to do something: tomorrow morning, I need to *remember* to bring in the milk.

We might *remember* our friends and family, or other people, deliberately thinking about them: today I will remember my friend Gareth who I haven't seen since the start of the pandemic.

We might *remember* things that happened in the past. That's what we've traditionally done on Remembrance Sunday, particularly remembering the two World Wars and the soldiers who fought in them. That's not *all* we remember on Remembrance Sunday, but it's a special emphasis. We pause and keep silent for two minutes to remember them.

Often we can learn a lot about other people by listening to their memories. As they *remember* events, we can focus on their stories and think about (remember!) others who have similar experiences. As Jesus travelled in his life, he listened to lots of other people's stories, as well as telling stories himself. We all see life slightly differently, but the more we listen to each other, the better we're able to understand each other.

This week, try to talk with someone who sees the world a bit differently to you. Maybe that's someone much older or younger than you, or from a different school, or with very different interests. If you can share stories with each other, you might find you have more in common than you think... and *remember* that we're all precious in the eyes of God.

Our next hymn reflects on the act of remembrance, and how it prompts us to prayer and action, working for peace in our world.

Hymn

By a monument of marble (STF 131)

By Marjorie Dobson <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wauEmhC9-es> CCLI 7135392

Alternative: Lord of the living (HP 654, CCLI 3200074)

1. By a monument of marble,
or a simple wooden cross,
here we gather to remember
sacrifice and tragic loss.
Blood-red poppy petals flutter,
each a symbol for a life,
drifting in a crimson curtain,
shadow of our constant strife.
2. Solemn silence now surrounds us
as we stand in memory.
Why must factions stir up conflict?
This eternal mystery
troubles hearts and stirs the conscience,
urges us to think again;
face the curse of confrontation,
yet reduce this searing pain.
3. For the sound of war still thunders
through our planet, on this day.
Every hour new victims suffer,
even as we meet to pray.
God, we need your help and guidance
in our constant search for peace.
Move us on to new solutions
as we pray that wars may cease.

Readings

[Micah 4:1-8](#)

[Matthew 5:43-48](#)

Sermon

How do we think about conflict?

There is a tension in every Remembrance Sunday service – at least, I’ve always felt one. How do we honour those who have served, whether voluntarily or through conscription, without glorifying the wars in which they took part? How can we balance striving for peace with potentially recognising war as an occasional awful necessity?

Within our Circuit, within individual congregations and I’m sure even within households, we hold different views on the need for the ability to defend our country, how large that capability should be in terms of resources and personnel. I believe it’s possible to disagree on those topics while respecting the memory of those who have served – and while also remembering and grieving the victims of all conflicts, whether those victims are in the military or civilians, and whether they’ve been on the same “side” as we might identify with.

There are areas I’m sure we *do* agree on though. We can all read the passage from Micah and long for the day when “nation will not take up sword against nation”. We can all acknowledge God’s desire for us to live peacefully. We can probably all nod along with Jesus’ instruction to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, even as we find it incredibly hard to act on.

I’m not a historian. I don’t know how long before 1914 things would have needed to take a different path in order to avoid the First World War, or what would have happened if we hadn’t gone to war with Germany in 1939. I don’t know what would have happened in 2003 if we’d had more accurate information about weapons of mass destruction, or if there was some way to avoid the 20-year-long war in Afghanistan that we withdrew from this year. I’d be deeply suspicious of anyone who claimed to have the answers to all these questions, and could say with certainty how to bring about global peace in some “easy” way that doesn’t rely on *all* people having a change of heart. While any one party is willing to use violence to oppress another, I find it hard to see perfectly peaceful ways of living together. The spectrum of opinions between “total pacifist” and “extreme interventionist” is broad and uncomfortable.

Praying for our enemies, individually or collectively

Fortunately, world leaders aren’t looking to me for answers, as far as I’m aware. I do wish they’d pay attention to this passage from Matthew’s Gospel though – and I wish we’d pay more attention to it as individuals, as well. We don’t even do particularly well at loving our neighbour, but loving enemies too? Praying for our persecutors? We may just about pay lip service to the idea, but do we really do it? Obviously there’s the easy prayer along the lines

of “I pray that they may come round to my way of thinking” – but we need to go beyond that, where we can.

I approach this topic from a highly privileged position. There are plenty of people I disagree with, but I wouldn't claim to be abused or discriminated against. If anyone should find it possible to pray for “enemies”, it's me. When I can't live up to that, how can I ask those who have genuinely suffered, in whatever way, to pray for those who have caused that suffering? I can't do so, in good conscience. I support the aims of restorative justice within safe, empowering practices – but I recognize the potential harm of asking survivors to “pray for their persecutors”.

I think it's more reasonable for us to take responsibility for this collectively as a society, recognising the humanity of even those that are deemed “enemies to society” and trying to understand their actions and views. Trying to understand the causes for a hurtful action doesn't excuse that action, but it can put it in a context that may help avoid something similar in the future. Trying to understand the view of someone else or a group doesn't mean we have to agree with or condone that view, but it can help us to reach compromises or accommodations – or simply to agree on the nature of our disagreement. Doing all of that without making victims feel forgotten is still challenging, but it feels more achievable, with God's help.

Is this a dilution of the Gospel? Is it a misunderstanding of God's power to restore right relationships? I struggle with this passage, like so many others, in discerning whether I'm following a Spirit-led interpretation applied to today's world, or a worldly interpretation with a veneer of spirituality.

The challenge of how we stand up for justice and equality without dehumanising anyone in the process is a complex one, which we shouldn't expect to be explained in detail in a six verse soundbite. We can acknowledge the core truth within the Gospel, while relying on the Spirit to help us work out the nuance. Where I go astray, I pray that the Spirit may correct me.

Beyond the warfare of old

The last ten years or so have put our differences into sharper focus than ever before. While social media hasn't created division out of harmony, it's certainly highlighted areas of profound disagreement – usually in a hostile and bitter way. The “culture wars” both national and global are surely depressing whether you identify with one particular “side” or not.

Where previously we may have prayed for peace mostly between nations, now I believe we need to pray for peace between “tribes” of different beliefs. The hurt and acrimony is very real, and while blood is not directly spilled on social media, the anger and vitriol surely carry on into the physical world.

Again, I ask each of us to see where we are in a position to see the humanity of those we disagree with. Sometimes that can be simply too painful, but where we are able to, this is surely part of what Jesus was preaching.

Perhaps ironically, the words of Micah ring particularly true to me for this very modern kind of fight. Micah writes that “Everyone will sit under their own vine, and under their own fig tree, and no-one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken.” These are words that George Washington, soldier and politician, used over fifty times in his letters – which Lin Manuel Miranda then immortalised in Hamilton. It is surely not too much to hope that everyone may have somewhere to sit, with no-one to make them afraid. That’s not the case right now, but that image gives me hope – if only we can find a path there.

Conclusion

This sermon has been meandering and messy – because my thoughts on these passages and the topic of remembrance are also meandering and messy. I suspect I’m not alone in that, and I don’t feel bad about it: we encounter God as we wrestle with impossible questions. That doesn’t excuse our need to do the work though: to strive to understand one another better, to seek peace and justice at the same time, and to place our trust in God in all things.

Amen.

Prayers of confession

Lord, we confess our sins – as individuals, as your church, and as nations of the world. We know we have not thought or acted as you want us to. We have been greedy, dishonest, and hurtful. We have not shown your love to others. Sometimes we have done the wrong thing; at other times we have simply not done the right thing.

We have wasted your abundant generosity, ignoring the needs of others. We have abused your creation, bringing extinction to so many species, and endangering the whole planet through climate change.

We have not seen ourselves or your image in others, wasting precious lives in futile and bloody wars.

Individually and collectively, we have failed you, Lord.

And yet despite all this, we cling to the promise you have given us: that we can *always* turn back to you, and you will *always* welcome us in our repentance, forgiving our sins. We don’t fully understand this promise, but we put our trust in it.

So we ask for that forgiveness now, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who died for us and was raised to new life by your love.

Amen.

Silence of remembrance

Our next hymn reminds us of how far we have yet to go in showing God's love to all; how those who need our care the most are often the last to receive it. The final lines remind us of God's grace, and challenge us to live out our faith every day.

Hymn

There are no strangers to God's love (STF 716)

By Andrew Pratt. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBxlv7rejw4> CCLI 5929779

Alternative: Make me a channel of your peace (HP 776, CCLI 649264)

1. There are no strangers to God's love,
yet we have privatised God's grace.
Bounded by nationhood and lies,
in fear we shrouded love's own face.
Acknowledging our sin and greed
we come confessing common need.
2. These are our neighbours and our friends,
the ones who run in fear from war,
who dread abuse by power or state,
or seek the means to be less poor;
these are the ones we have denied,
as in each one the Christ has cried.
3. When people seeking sanctuary
come to this place and need our aid,
then in Christ's name let's offer care;
through this our debt of love is paid.
God's grace is free, this grace receive,
let actions show what we believe.

Prayers of intercession

Lord, you have taught us to bring our worries before you in prayer. As we tell you our concerns, we listen for your voice in reply, guiding us and showing us your will.

We pray for your church. May we, both individually and as organizations, live out your Word, showing your love and grace to all. In times of division and hurtful language, may your church provide sanctuary and peace. We pray for those who are persecuted for their beliefs, punished just for recognizing you as our creator.

We pray for your world. As COP26 concludes, may all nations make renewed efforts to go beyond their commitments, seeking ways to find a grace-filled place within our natural world. Lord, open our eyes to both the dangers of our past behaviour and the opportunities to find new joy in your creation. May those of us in richer countries, more isolated from climate change, rediscover our common humanity with those who are stand on the brink of disaster.

We pray for the nations of the world. We continue to think of Afghanistan, particularly the young women and girls banned from education, and all those facing famine. We pray for all those who suffer persecution and discrimination, whether through gender, race, disability or other ways humanity finds to separate “us” from “them”. We remember the victims of wars through the ages, both those fighting in them and civilians. We think about nations still at war, or living in fear of it. Lord, we pray that your wisdom and compassion may grow in the hearts of world leaders, and that they may serve as inspiration for all people.

We pray for those we see as enemies, for whatever reason, to the extent that we can. We do so because Jesus told us to, even though it comes hard to us. We ask for more peaceful and loving relationships, with greater shared understanding.

We pray for local and personal concerns. Lord, you know our fears, hopes and dreams better than we know them ourselves, but we lift them to you now. We pray for those we know who are ill, and those who care for them. We pray for the effects of the pandemic on mental and physical health, personal finances, unity of communities, and on our worship practices. In a moment of quiet, we each bring our own personal prayers to God.

Amen.

Our final hymn continues our prayers, looking forward to a world of justice, equality and peace – and acknowledging our part in that, as we ask to grow in God’s likeness.

Hymn

For the healing of the nations (STF 696, HP 402)

By Fred Kaan. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dc-2tiAfSyY> CCLI 3200067

1. For the healing of the nations,
Lord, we pray with one accord;
for a just and equal sharing
of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action
help us rise and pledge our word.
2. Lead us forward into freedom;
from despair your world release,
that, redeemed from war and hatred,
all may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness
fear will die and hope increase.
3. All that kills abundant living,
let it from the earth be banned;
pride of status, race, or schooling,
dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice
may we hallow life's brief span.
4. You, Creator-God, have written
your great name on humankind;
for our growing in Your likeness
bring the life of Christ to mind;
that by our response and service
earth its destiny may find.

Blessing

May we honour those who have gone before us, as we our work for God's kingdom for the present and the future.

May we always remember the past, and listen to the voices of those who have experiences different to ours, seeing the image of God in others.

May we place God in the centre of our lives, that we may see the world through God's lens of love.

And may the blessing of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer, be with us all, evermore. Amen.