Sermon

So it is Remembrance Sunday, the Sunday nearest to Armistice Day, or Veterans Day in the USA. It is a time when many around the world pause for a moment, to remember and reflect and mourn. So this Sunday is the time for a sermon in which I tell you that war and violence are terrible evils in the world, and remind you of the terrible suffering which they bring. It is the time when I remind you that God calls us to another way which revolves around compassion and mercy and justice and peace. It is time for me to tell you that as Christians we should not easily accept the division of our world into nations and groups which take it as part of their identity that they must compete with each other and fight for power over each other.

And while I'm at it, I can proclaim our hope that the vision of scripture is that fear and hatred will not have the last word, but that the purpose of God is as the prophets proclaimed, that we can lay down our weapons and study war no more, that we can turn our spears into ploughs and our defence budgets it health care and education. That in the end God will wipe every bitter tear and put an end to death itself. I'm sure I have preached that many times and I'm sure that it is being preached in many places this morning, and I'm convinced that it is vitally true.

But I have a problem this morning. In fact I have two. In fact I have lots of problems but only two of them are relevant to the sermon. The first is that Remembrance Sunday feels different to me this year. I have conducted such Services and ceremony’s many times, and I believe that holy remembrance of those who have died in war is a proper and right thing to do. But at the turn of the year last December, we received the news that our nephew Tommy had been killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan.

So while I can and I have and I do proclaim what I believe about war and conflict and the need for campaigns and strategies for peace, I now understand how easy it can be to do that from a safe distance, and how different it looks from a graveside as a family weep for their 23 year old son. So now, more strongly than ever, I am convinced that war is evil and
violence is destructive and hatred breeds only more hatred. But standing in the pulpit saying things that I expect us all to agree with doesn't really seem like an adequate response. It doesn't feel like a response worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who spoke truths so deep that they changed the way people lived their lives.

The second problem is our bible text this morning. We read of Paul writing to a community in crisis, and not telling them what they should believe but telling them how they should live. There could have been no end of statements he could have made that would have bound people together and encouraged them in their faith. He could have ridiculed the godless, or criticised the Romans, or made fun of those who persecuted them, and everyone would have rallied round and felt better, for we love to have our own beliefs and prejudices confirmed.

That would have made Paul popular and it would have raised the spirits of the community and it would have been great. What a fantastic leader, people might have said, what a superb letter. And if he had done that, I would have felt justified in doing the same thing. I could have given one of those nice sermons about violence being bad and peace being good and I could have condemned the sin that is woven into the power structures of the world, and made big statements about the love of God being for everyone. And while it is probably impossible to expect, in a congregation like this, that everyone will agree about anything, the vast majority of us would be able to go home feeling that we have heard what we wanted to hear and that we are stronger in our faith and our beliefs and our convictions.

Paul, however, in his inspired wisdom, does not do that. At least not today. Instead he writes about how people live their lives. Instead he writes about the importance of the example he has set, and at least by implication, the importance of the examples they are going to set. He is not talking about war and peace, that was not the issue facing the Thessalonians. But if it had been we can imagine his response would been similar. For he does not end his message by saying – “never tire of believing what is right?” No he ends it by saying “never tire of doing what is right”
That is troubling – because it is much easier to talk about what we believe than it is to do what we believe. And if we are not a people who do not do the things that lead to peace and justice, then we have no right to make easy pronouncements on these matters. It is much easier to talk about the need for peace, and the importance of mercy, and the value of forgiveness, than it is to proclaim these things by the example we set, by the lives we lead. And if our lives do not create peace, and mercy, and forgiveness, then we have no right to preach about these things.

A man once came to see his pastor on a Sunday afternoon and he was in a terrible state. He explained that a family he knew had not been able to pay their rent that month and the landlord was going to put them out on the streets. And when he had heard the sermon that morning about the gospel call to care for the poor and the needy he knew he had to say something. Don’t worry, said the pastor, I’ll call round a few people I’m sure we will be able to put together enough money to cover their rent, at least for another month. Go and find them and tell them we will pay the rent for them. The man looked very relieved, and as he left the pastor called after him and asked – by the way, how do know this family? He replied, I’m their landlord.

We can say all the right things, but our involvement in the world might say something quite different. Indeed our involvement in church can sometimes be dangerous. (bible texts cause a problem and going to church can be dangerous!) Because that can allow us to believe that we are good people doing the right and holding the correct beliefs, while we continue living in ways that lead to suffering, and make life worse for the poor and weak, and increase resentment and violence. What Paul reminds us today, is that what we say we believe is not what really matters. Actually Christianity has never been that kind of religion. What we do with our lives, the product of how we spend our days, will give out a far more important message.

On a big scale that may raise questions about whether we will be enjoying a good pension because our money has been invested in companies that trade in arms, or pay workers a pittance in poor countries, or profit from
activities condemned by the United Nations. On a professional scale that may raise questions about the ethical practices of our own companies and organisations, what are the consequences of the work that we do, whose interests are served by it and who perhaps suffers as a result of it. On a personal scale that may raise questions about how we relate to one another, how we treat people whom we perceive as our enemies, how much we actually do to reach out to those who are different from us.

The point is that what matters is what we actually do, the results that we produce, the example that we set. It is all very well for us to convince ourselves that we are Christians, that we believe in an end to conflict, that we promote harmony and compassion and love and understanding. But is anyone else convinced of that? And if the message that we proclaim is the example that we set rather than the statements we agree with or the groups we belong to, then how committed are we to peace in our world, and how convinced are we about the need for peace, and the importance of mercy, and the value of forgiveness.

There is always going to be pain, and hurt, and suffering in our world. Jesus himself made it clear to his followers that this is what they should expect. But that doesn’t mean it is what we should accept, for Jesus is our ultimate example of one who would give his all to demonstrate that another way is possible, and he rose again as proof that this other way is in the end what will overcome. As we remember today, as we remember so much suffering and loss, as we remember the hope of God’s kingdom let us not do it in a lazy way, but let us do it in an active way. In order to make ourselves a model for others to be inspired by. In order that we may not be accused of tiring of doing what is right.