

Today is the third Sunday before Advent so our minds would normally be turning more and more towards the great feast of the nativity that will in a few weeks' time talk of peace on earth, goodwill to all human beings. We will be challenged once again to renew our faith and hope in the power of God's love. We will be reminded once again that God uses our hands and our hearts, to bring peace, justice and integrity to our homes, communities, country and world.

But today is also Remembrance Sunday and our readings change from the normal advent readings to acknowledge that this is a day for looking back. Remembrance Sunday still can break our hearts with unbearable sorrow when we contemplate those times, a little more than a century ago, when our world was consumed by a frenzied violence that seethed across much of Europe like a raging fire that could not be quenched; a fire that consumed the lives and dreams of millions and millions of people just like us, of sons like our sons, of neighbours like our neighbours. And worse still the Armistice we commemorate today was not to offer return to a peaceful Ireland to the soldiers who survived the war but rather a descent into a War of Independence and a Civil War. One of the worst aspects of all those wars is that it was neighbour against neighbour and more often than not Christian against Christian.

The vast majority of those who fought and died whether on Europe's killing fields or here in Ireland would have been familiar with today's readings. They went to Churches on Sunday, whether they were Protestant or Catholic, Irish or British, German or French, for most of the protagonists regardless of the side on which they fought, regardless of the differences in uniform or political ambition, had from early childhood been deeply immersed and nurtured in the Christian tradition and scripture. They were all descendants of Jacob, all familiar with the words of Isaiah and Romans and John.

They knew the prophecy of Isaiah- and how they must have yearned for it even as the sound of gunfire reminded them it was not yet at hand.

"They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore". How many of those we remember asked themselves during those fateful days "If God is for us, who is against us?" Here were strong words that bolstered their belief that their cause and theirs alone was righteous. God was with them in a way he was not with those who were against them. Each believed God was for them and not for their enemy.

The word's of Christ in John's gospel must have been profoundly reassuring and inspiring as death encircled them and left no escape. 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay

down one's life for one's friends". So they did in their hundreds of thousands, they took the lives of the enemy because that was their mission and they laid down their own lives for their friends because that was their vocation.

And now at this remove we who know how the future worked out, who gather on this day and hear again those words of Isaiah, Romans, John, must be asking ourselves, "What then are we to say about these things?" What then are we saying to our children and grandchildren about the commandment to love one another? Are we separating the world into those worthy of our love and those who are not. Are we sowing the seeds of a world beyond enmity fit for the child of Bethlehem or are we feeding the rancour, racism, sexism, homophobia, sectarianism that hold the children of Jacob back from creating a world flooded with grace, transformed by our lived love?

Today as Covid keeps us from gathering in person, as it robs some of life and others of proper goodbyes, as it demands of us that we change our lives in order to keep our friends and neighbours and ourselves safe, it is worth remembering that while our sacrifice may feel difficult, how different it is from those far off days we contemplate on this and every Remembrance Sunday. How many young men on all sides in those tragic years of slaughter, first attended Church before they marched off to war and into a great darkness.

We may be restricted to walking within five kilometres of our homes but let us acknowledge what freedom we do have and say with Isaiah,

**"Come, descendants of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the LORD".**