

Remembrance Sunday

“Stand Firm”

Psalm 17:1-9; II Thessalonians 2:13-17

One of the traditions, hidden in plain sight, in this church on Remembrance Sunday is the inscription on the wreaths that are laid at the war memorial. I noticed it when I came here 18 years ago. One says, “On behalf of the people of Morningside”; the other says, “On behalf of the children of Morningside.” Each year when we order new wreaths for this service it is one of those poignant and powerful moments for me as I write the script afresh on the cards. It is a tradition I like and one I hope we keep.

Tradition, like history, is important. We forget them at our peril. Not that we should be bound by them, but that we should learn from them and continually assess why things are the way they are, and how the past informs the present and shapes the future.

Not all traditions are good, not all traditions remain unchanged as the years past, but some traditions are handed on to us and are treated with reverence and respect from generation to generation, because they teach us some of the core things of humanity that speak wisdom no matter how old they are.

There was a time when people questioned whether this season of Remembrance needed to continue or to adapt, particularly as the generations who lived through the World Wars began to fade. If anything, in our country, the desire to remember has grown, particularly in the face of a world that is fragile and fraught with fake news, and factions, and tribalism in politics and sport and religion. What we do here this morning, symbolised by those two cards on the poppy wreaths, draws people together, includes people from all backgrounds, and unites us in our diversity so that we might be one at this moment. And that is a good thing.

In the early days of the Christian Church there were no templates to follow, but traditions began to grow up for Christians to strive to follow. We heard about some of them in our second reading from the Bible. Traditions about the importance of truth and honour; traditions about being

hopeful and hospitable; traditions about being supportive of the poor and the vulnerable and the isolated. Traditions that looked beyond the narrow to the broad. Traditions that included rather than excluded. Paul wrote to the little church in Thessalonica that they should establish these things in 'every good work and word.'

It is one of the glories and disgraces, of the church when it stands firm in these traditions, or walks away from them. It is one of the glories and disgraces of our society when it stands firm in these traditions, or walks away from them too. When women and men, in time of conflict, filled with high ideals, or filled with a simple and honest desire to do their bit and play their part, died in any conflict to defend freedom for all, hope for all, food for all, shelter for all, and peace for all, then we in this present day do their memory a disservice if we do not strive for the same things.

Remembering the conflicts of the past and present also challenges us today to ask those first order questions of what we believe, and why we believe, and how we set the priorities in our lives. It is not enough to know what we are against, important though that might be. It is as important, maybe even more important, to know what we are for in life, and how we go about achieving and doing the good that we want to see and be.

In a time of General Election, with the campaigning and claim and counter claim, the weight of responsibility on each one of us to work out what we believe, and what we want for our country, for our world, and for ourselves, is significant. At a time when our country and our world are deeply divided, what is going to hold us together? At a time when there are strong, honestly held convictions that are diametrically opposed to each other, how are we to negotiate solutions that include and exclude? Where do we stand firm, and where do we compromise. There are times when listening to some in the political world when I despair at the windy rhetoric, the bending of truths, the convenient lapses in memory, and the desperate, desperate hope that this time someone, somewhere, might be telling the truth and might have a plan that is worth a shot.

When is standing firm on principles and beliefs a commendable thing, and when is it stubborn bloody-mindedness? When is clinging to a referendum result, and you can take your pick from

recent ones, and stating that this is the majority view, the democratic thing to do, and when is it necessary to realise that any vote is often a snap shot of a moment, and that people may, will and do change their minds? And how can you with that knowledge seek to govern a nation when the dividing lines keep shifting between north and south, young and old, unionist and nationalist, brexiteer and remainer?

When Paul, in the Bible, challenges people to stand firm, does that mean never moving, or changing, or adapting, or compromising, when circumstances and context change? I wouldn't want anyone saying they would rather be dying in a ditch – because we know that rarely ends well.

I looked again at where the Bible suggests we stand firm. We are to stand firm in good hope, good grace, good work, and good words. As we reflect on this Remembrance Sunday on where women and men took, and still take, their stance in time of conflict, where do we, in time of relative peace, do we take our stance. On what things do we stand firm, and how do these things have the possibility to shape our world and shape the way that we live our lives today? Might that be the way in which we take our decisions in the future: at the ballot box, in times of national uneasiness, in times of global warming. Where do we stand firm, and as we stand, do we do so in good hope, good grace, and show this by our good work and our good words?

Yesterday morning I heard a poem/song on radio. It's called People's Faces, by Kate Tempest.

Here is part of it:

*It's coming to pass
My country's coming apart
The whole thing's becoming
Such a bumbling farce
Was that a pivotal historical moment
We just went stumbling past?
Here we are
Dancing in the rumbling dark
So come a little closer
Give me something to grasp
Give me your beautiful
Crumbling heart...
We're working every dread day that is given us...
Like we're going to buckle underneath the trouble
Like any minute now
The struggle's going to finish us*

*And then we smile at all our friends...
There is so much peace to be found in people's faces...
More empathy
Less greed
More respect...
I'm listening to every little whisper in the distance singing hymns
And I can
I can feel things
Changing...
We got our heads down and our hackles up
Our back's against the wall
I can feel your heart racing...
And I can feel things changing
...I can see your faces
I love people's faces*

We have no faces on our war memorials, only names – but they stand for people who walked our streets, and when the time came, they made their choices, and did their bit, and stood firm. And on the wreath there are no faces, and no names, just, ‘all the people of Morningside...all the children of Morningside.’ In 2019, we too have choices to make, and to do our bit, and to stand firm, and show what we believe and who we are by our good hope, our good grace, in our good work and in our good words.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen