

Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost – 11 November 2018

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Dr Karen Campbell, Minister of Marchmont St Giles, Edinburgh, for her thoughts on the twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Remembrance Sunday.

Introduction.....	2
Ruth 3:1–5, 4:13–17	2
Psalm 127	3
Hebrews 9:24–28	3
Mark 12:38–44	4
Sermon ideas	4
Time with children	7
Prayers	8
Musical suggestions	17

Introduction

Today is Remembrance Sunday and marks the centenary of the end of ‘The War to end all Wars’; the very day set aside to remember all the men, women and children who gave of their life, or their loved ones, or their health in time of war.

It is a very emotive day, and one which can be challenging for many reasons. The important thing is that for those of us who conduct worship today, we do so with integrity and with the Gospel of Christ at the heart of our thoughts and words.

Armistice and Remembrance services commit a congregation to world-wide remembrance and to prayer for those who put their lives at risk now. The pastoral care of the families whose loved ones have died still remains, in the aftermath of war, with the local parish church. Remembrance is something that we are charged to keep alive both in the sacramental life of the congregation, but also within the acknowledgement that we are part of the communion of saints. Armistice and Remembrance Sunday originate from a pastoral necessity to provide a place for the sharing of grief and the shared sense of loss for a generation. Today, those of us who have not experienced such a loss should still show solidarity with those who have, to show that the Church shares the loss and has something vital to say to those who are affected.

[Ruth 3:1–5, 4:13–17](#)

The lessons today are about both the vulnerability and the faithful strength of widows. Ruth and Naomi both leave a land which has nothing left for them, Naomi returning to a place and people she knows, and Ruth supporting her mother-in-law, to ensure her safety, while at the same time, courageously moving towards an entirely new situation.

When they return their future is an important theme. Naomi encourages Ruth to look towards Boaz as her future, even though there is another closer male relative, who might have a bigger responsibility to care for her.

Naomi is quite clear what Ruth must do and how she must do it. The “threshing room floor” was seen as a place of fertility and we should not underestimate the symbolism and intention of the writer. The gathering of the harvest was a time of great excitement, when communities would join together to gather the harvest safely in and young people would meet. Ruth’s instructions to “*lie down*” clearly have sexual overtones, combine with the instruction to “*uncover the feet*”, which was a euphemism for uncovering the genitalia.

From a 21st century viewpoint, it could almost look as if Naomi is prostituting Ruth, to ensure both of their futures, and we should not underestimate the lengths that vulnerable women go to, to ensure their safety and security. But this story is not meant to be seen as abusive; it is a story of faith, letting us see the future Messianic importance of Ruth.

[Psalm 127](#)

This is an entry psalm as the people arrive in Jerusalem at the barley harvest and it harks back to the important role which Ruth had in the faith story of Israel. It is also associated in the Jewish narrative with the Festival of Weeks, also called Shavuot and related to the Christian celebration of Pentecost, celebrated in Jewish tradition in the middle of May.

The psalm is full of rich imagery and advice about how to build well. It is about the foundation of communities and countries, as well as individual buildings and lives of faith.

[Hebrews 9:24–28](#)

Once a year the High Priest in Israel would enter the Holy of Holies, which is the innermost room in the Jerusalem Temple. At one time it housed The Ark of the Covenant. This act was regarded as the High Priest entering into the presence of God. He interceded on behalf of the people of Israel and offered sacrifices for himself and on behalf of the nation. He literally had blood on his hands. The Letter to the Hebrews equates this to a reflection of the Heavenly state. However, when Christ comes, the action of the High Priest becomes obsolete. This once and for all sacrifice of Christ never needs to be repeated. Within the sacrificial system of the Jerusalem Temple, those who first heard or read these words would not be shocked by the imagery or interpretation because it was part of their religious heritage.

However, for the 21st mind with no experience or understanding of animal sacrifice, these concepts may take a little longer to get our heads around and to see beyond the text to their meaning. The concept of the *scapegoat* has a rich heritage in the Old Testament canon; literally the idea of the sins of the community being placed within an animal and being cast out into the desert. This idea of Christ as the scapegoat for the sin of the world is one which therefore has deep origins within Jewish heritage; although we must remember it was once, and for all.

From 1935-37 Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught at the underground seminary, training Confessing Church Pastors in Finkenwalde, before the Nazi regime shut it down after the Confessing

Church's Barmen Declaration. On the altar there was a single word engraved on it: "*hapax*", which means "*once*". "*Once for all*" appears in Hebrews to call us to remember Christ's work on the Cross and in the Garden of Resurrection. In the midst of the evil of the Nazi regime, *hapax* reminded those trainee pastors of the claim staked by Christ for everyone.

[Mark 12:38–44](#)

The Gospel lesson today reminds us that even the poorest and most vulnerable people can teach us about God's kingdom. Here is someone who, in spite of her poverty, living at the margins of society, gives so much more than others with more means. Jesus elevates the widow from someone who is almost invisible, to someone who is given a place of honour in God's kingdom. In the lead-up to this story, Jesus challenges the Temple system and those who administer it. He calls us to be humble and not practise our piety before everyone, to pray in secret, to dress simply and not flaunt who we are or what we are about. Perhaps in those days being seen to be righteous was more important than actually being so.

It is the "humble widows" who simply get on with things, who are in many instances the backbone of our churches and we should give thanks for this. Where would the Temple and the Church be without these devout souls, who do not expect much, but who give greatly?

Sermon ideas

A sermon could concentrate on the women who sacrificed much before, during and after WW1 and the place in which Christ holds them as widows in the Kingdom. Ruth, Naomi and the Widow of St Mark each hold a special place in the story of faith and ensure that we remember that even the faceless and most vulnerable are held at the heart of God.

A sermon could consider the "*once and for all*" nature of God and no matter what we do to the world, no matter how many poor choices we make, Christ is there for us at the heart of life; always walking into the Garden of New Life, having walked through the valley of death, leading us to new pastures.

There are many opportunities today to tell stories from WW1 (as well as other conflicts) and to reflect the cost of war and the real human stories that we should not forget:

Vera Brittain, who was committed to women's rights, fought her father to attend university. As a result of her brother and his three friends enlisting at the beginning of the War, she left University and joined a Voluntary Aid Detachment, nursing in Britain, Malta

and France. All four men died and she lived her life committed to The Peace Movement. At the end of the War she said:

“My only hope now was to become the complete automaton, working mechanically and no longer even pretending to be animated by idols.” [1]

She also raged against the three institutions that she blamed for the death of her friends: God, King and Country, and so when an invitation to tea came from the vicar, she declined. She also noted that on 11th November 1918 those around her in the hospital in which she worked did not shout that they had won the war; only that the war was over.

For her, peace was horrid and although it appeared *‘to an exhausted world as divine normality, the spring of life after the winter of death’*, it was not. She like many others had to cling on just to survive, so that they could all move into the future. Like others of her generation, she came close to physical and mental breakdown because of the extended and extensive grief that she experienced and which she took into the future. She visited her brother’s grave in Italy and she mentions the service for the installation of the Unknown Warrior in 1920, but she makes no comment. She does comment about the lack of interest in the Great War shown by her younger colleagues in the university and she decides never to mention the war publicly there again.

Rudyard Kipling lost his only son at Loos in 1915, and his body was not recovered in his father’s lifetime. His death affected the rest of his father’s life, and part of his way of coming to terms with the death was his involvement with the Imperial War Graves Commission which was to become the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in 1960. As one of Britain’s most famous authors, Kipling was involved in thinking about the symbolism and wording which was given to memorials, gravestones and the whole set-up of graveyards abroad after the Great War. Kipling was a committed Christian and his biggest contribution to the Imperial War Graves Commission was his suggestions that the Stones of Remembrance in the graveyards should have the biblical phrase from Ecclesiasticus 44:14, *‘Their Name Liveth Forevermore’* inscribed on them; and the gravestones of unknown soldiers should read, *‘Known Unto God’*. He also chose the inscription on the Cenotaph which reads, *‘The Glorious Dead’*. He was also influential in the beginning of the Last Post Ceremony at the Menin Gate in Ypres every night at 8pm, when people gather, listen to the last post played on the bugle and stand in silence for two minutes.

Yet despite his involvement with the Commission, Kipling did not agree with the notion of death for God, King and Country. One of his most famous quotes is, *‘If they should ask us why we died, tell them that our Fathers lied’*. For some, this notion confirmed for them the

futility and the loss of the war. Others rejected it, believing that there was some meaning to the deaths of their loved ones.

Harry Lauder was another father affected by the death of his son. He was the most famous Scottish entertainer of the time, who wrote of the loss that he knew he had suffered and his inability to open the telegram on New Year's Day 1917. Churchill referred to him as Scotland's greatest ambassador and at one point he was the most famous and highest paid entertainer in the world. He had spent the war encouraging men to sign up, and through his shows raised vast amounts of money for the war effort, for which he was knighted in 1919. His son's death had a profound effect on him. He said that he felt that "everything had come to an end" and "the board of life was black and blank". Three days later he returned to the stage, even singing The Laddies Song, in which the "fond mother kisses her son". The story goes that as he finished the song and the curtain came down, Lauder fainted. Along with the likes of Rudyard Kipling, Lauder exemplified for many at the time the grief of the British father, where no-one was immune from loss and suffering.

In Lauder's book, "A Minstrel in France", he talks about visiting his son's grave: *"I thought of him as a baby, and as a wee laddie beginning to run around and talk to us. I thought of him in every phase and bit of his life, and of the friends that we had been, he and I! Such chums we were, always! I wanted to reach my arms down into that dark grave, and clasp my boy tightly to my breast, and kiss him. And I wanted to thank him for what he had done for his country, and his mother, and for me."*

John Baillie, Professor of Theology at Edinburgh University, served during the First World War. He said of his experience, *"The years – not much less than four - which I spent in France during the War were fallow years for me, as for so many others. I hardly read a page either of divinity or of metaphysic, and I had little time or opportunity for consecutive thinking. Yet the period brought with it a very great broadening of experience and, above all, such an understanding of the mind and temper.....When I turned again to my old pursuits after the War was over, the khaki figures still seemed to keep their place in the background of my mind, and in much of what I have written since these days a clairvoyant reader may find them haunting the margins of the page."* [2]

[1] Brittain, V, Testament of Youth, London, Virage Press, 1978 (450).

[2] Baillie, J Confessions of a Transplanted Scot, in *The Baillie Papers*, Edinburgh University.

Time with children

Britain has adopted the poppy to remember those who died or were forever affected by their service in time of war. France uses the symbol of the blue cornflower. Belgium uses the white daisy. Each one helps us to remember (the original Greek means to “bring to present significance”) people and their families, we have never met.

Last year I was in Ypres and was at a graveyard called Dochy Farm. There I conducted a service on the centenary of the death of Jimmy Speirs. He played for Rangers Football Club and during the weekend of events to remember Scotland’s contribution to the Battle of Passchendaele, I was asked to take part in the thanksgiving for his contribution. Jimmy had also played for Bradford City during their second season in the First Division. In 1911 he captained the team and took them to the FA Cup Final, where he scored the winning goal. That was the only year that Bradford City reached the Cup Final.

Jimmy Speirs was a natural leader of men and won the Military Medal at the Battle of Arras in May 1917. He led his men of the Cameron Highlanders into the battle on 20th August and he, among many men that day, was killed.

The day we arrived to take part in the service, the former Rangers and Scotland Player, Willie Henderson, was there to lay a wreath on behalf of Rangers, along with members of Jimmy’s family. But what we found there was unexpected. Jimmy Speirs has not only been remembered as part of the Rangers story, but he also is a very important part of the Bradford City story and as we approached the grave we were met by a busload of Bradford City supporters who go on a tour of WW1 graveyards and visit all the players who died during the WW1. It was an emotional event, with Rangers and Bradford City scarves on his grave, with singing and memories and a wreath-laying ceremony.

After the ceremony a man approached me and asked me to say a blessing at his grandfather’s grave in another part of the cemetery. He had been a driver on the London Underground and although he didn’t need to sign up he did so and left his wife and six children to serve on the Front. He died a couple of months after Jimmy Speirs and as the man told me the story, he cried, telling me about how well his children had all done and how his grandchildren had also lived good lives.

That day I saw forgetting and remembering; forgetting someone who had played an important part in the footballing life of Scotland and remembering a man who led another team to their only victory in the FA Cup, and supporters returning to the place of sacrifice of

a great man; as well as a man whose grandfather had given life to a family who still honoured his sacrifice.

Prayers

Call to Worship

We come this day
to remember the sacrifice
of service personnel from many nations
who defended against and advanced towards
each other.

We remember them in fox hole and mountain top

Praying for their friends and families

Before the big push.

And now together

we remember their sacrifice,

their laughter and love of life

and their respective countries

and now we seek God's blessings this day

Prayers of Approach, Confession and Absolution

Most gracious God,
whose love reaches out to us
no matter where we are
no matter what we do
no matter how we think of God,
we offer our thanks
for the good of creation
and the renewing liberty of Your grace.

We rejoice in the freedom and peace in which we live.

Especially on this day we give thanks

for the remembrance of those whose lives were given in time of war,

and for the bonds of friendship and appreciation

between the nations of the world.

Forgive us when we fail to be the hand of peace,

the voice of magnanimity,

and the example of justice in our lives.

Forgive us when we keep silence when we should be speaking out.

Jesus calls us to receive His forgiveness
and to practise it in our lives,
whether we want it or need it
whether we deserve it or seek it.
Jesus calls us always to seek reconciliation
With all the people we meet.

Enable us in all things
to seek the good of the world,
to practise forgiveness and reconciliation,
to work for the increase of peace and justice,
to show tolerance and open-mindedness to all
and to practise generosity of spirit and openness of hospitality,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Intercessions

The Prophet Amos says:

“Hate evil and love good,
then work it out in the public square.
Maybe God, the God-of-the-Angel-Armies
Will notice your remnant and be gracious.”

Amos 5:15 (The Message)

Let us pray

Creator Spirit of all that is and was and will be,
A hundred years ago and here today
we pray for families
whose loved ones did not return
from the place of war.

We raise to You, O Eternal Keeper
husbands and wives,
who sought and still seek to understand the changes
deep within the soul of their partners
through their experience of war

We raise to You, O Friend of All
friends and comrades
who lived and live in the aftermath,
who exist in the space between
youth and survival.
For survivors of bomb and blast
and bullet and shrapnel
whose bravery endured and endures
through operations and setbacks
through rehabilitation and prosthetics,
skin grafts and patience.

We raise to You, O Spirit of Hope
people then and everyone now
who have no experience of combat.
May we pray for the healing of hearts and bodies.

Let us ask for God's blessings
that we might
work for peace,
pray in hope
demand justice for powerless people
and be the reconciling presence
which this world
and every home and community
so desperately needs.
In Jesus Name.

Prayer of thanksgiving and intercession

“So do not worry about tomorrow,
for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.
Today's trouble is enough for today.”

As the Spirit
hovered over the face of the waters
at the very moment of creation,
and declared everything created as good.

As the Spirit, like a wind
swirled around the Disciples at Pentecost,
and helped them find a common purpose and language.
May Your Spirit
of sea and sky
inhabit our souls this day.

Let prayers of thanks arise
for the frightened and valuable souls
of ships and submarines, of army units and flying squadrons
whose names are recorded on memorials
throughout this country and far afield,
who were someone's son or daughter,
husband or wife,
mother or father.

Let prayers of thanks arise
For the many people
who came from overseas
to serve,
who paid the ultimate price.

We pray for service personnel
working for the building of peace today,
and for their families.

Let prayers of thanks arise,
for the people of this land who assisted
in the war effort,
to care for personnel who were wounded,
comfort the grieving,
and support those who served.

We pray for people
who through their work
promote peace
and comfort those who live
in the aftermath of war.

Let prayers arise,
for the good of this day
and the good we value in our lives;
that we might catch a glimpse
and be inspired of what was done long ago
and apply examples of service and humility
here and now.

For political leaders whose words and decisions
can make all the difference in the world,
we pray that they know the responsibility
with which they have been entrusted.

We give thanks
for the meaning of the memorials in this place of worship
and in every town centre
and for all that they have meant
to those far and near.

These prayers
and the silent prayers of our hearts
we dedicate to You,
O Creator of Heaven and Earth,
who holds all souls in Your hands
and in whom we place our trust and faith.

Prayers of intercession

Loving God,
The hills resound with Your beauty
the birds sing of Your glory
the seas roar with Your grandeur.

May our frail lives
reflect the vulnerability
and beauty
of Your Son, Jesus Christ
who lived to bring everyone to wholeness,
who died a brutal death,
who came forth on Easter Day

still with the wounds of suffering
on His body.

May we show in our words and actions
the hope and reality of new life, lived fully.

Let us pray for families,
who live in the aftermath of war
in the space between
remembering and bitter loss.

Let us ask for God's blessings,
that we might
work for peace,
pray in hope
and be a reconciling presence,
which this world
and every home and community
desperately needs.

In Jesus Name.
Amen

Call to Remembrance

“Those who wait for the Lord shall renew
their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary
they shall walk and not faint.”

Isaiah 40:31

We hold before God this day,
The memory of people
whose memory we cherish.

In this time of silence may we
lift our eyes above the brokenness of this world
and pray for those who might do us harm.

As we honour the past,
let us think of the future;
and all the ways God will work in us and through us for peace.

So, let us stand, and together remember:

Act of Remembrance

“They shall grow not old,
as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them,
nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun
and in the morning,
We will remember them.”

We will remember them.

From “The Fallen”, by Laurence Binyon

SILENCE

“When you go home
tell them of us and say,
for your tomorrow
we gave our today.”

Epitaph from the Battle of Kohima

Wreath laying

Call to remembrance

“Blessed are the peacemakers;
For they shall be called the children of God.”

Matthew 5:9

We come, with our personal experiences of War;
Vivid, cruel, anarchic and vibrant.
We come, our only knowledge,
through television, newspaper and the internet
of the realities of modern warfare.

And together we
remember the colourful, frail and human lives
cut down in conflicts
and seek faith in God,

whom we are told
suffers as we suffer in our brokenness
and walks with us through
the valley of the shadow of death
into the wholeness and promise
of the dawning day of Resurrection.

So, let us stand, and together remember:

Act of Remembrance

“They shall grow not old,
as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them,
nor the years condemn.
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tell them of us and say,
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Wreath laying

Call to Remembrance

“What does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?”

Micah 6:8

Remember Arras, Passchendaele, Verdun.
Remember El Alamein, the Normandy beaches.
Remember Dresden, Nagasaki and Burma.
Remember Korea, the Falkland Islands, Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Remember the courage, the comradeship, the ingenuity,
the spirit of working together for a common cause,
the planning together for a better world that would come with peace.

Remember the widows of sixty years and more,
the older men and women living now who never knew their fathers.
Remember the new widows,
Whose children still cry for their dads.

Remember the love that was lost, the wisdom wasted,
the minds that were twisted and the limbs distorted.

Remember those who survived
With the hidden wounds
And give Your support to all those who support them.

Let us stand in silence and Remember:

Act of Remembrance

“They shall grow not old,
as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them,
nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun
and in the morning,
We will remember them.”
We will remember them.

From “The Fallen”, by Laurence Binyon

SILENCE

“When you go home
tell them of us and say,
for your tomorrow
we gave our today.”

Epitaph from the Battle of Kohima

Wreath laying

Musical suggestions

- CH4 187 – “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy”
- CH4 192 – “All my hope on God is founded”
- CH4 254 – “O God we bear the imprint of Thy face”
- CH4 260 – “Eternal Father strong to save”
- CH4 402 – “Take up your Cross”, the Saviour said”
- CH4 477 – “Lo, He comes with clouds descending”
- CH4 495 – “Spirit of God, descend upon my heart”
- CH4 502 – “Take my life, Lord let it be”
- CH4 504 – “Two little fishes, five loaves of bread”
- CH4 521 – “Brother man, fold to thy heart thy brother”
- CH4 580 – “O God our help in ages past”
- CH4 681 – “Send out the Gospel! Let it sound”
- CH4 693 – “Help us forgive, forgiving Lord”
- CH4 704 – “I vow to thee my country”
- CH4 706 – “For the healing of the nations”
- CH4 712 – “What shall we pray for those who died”
- CH4 721 – “We lay our broken world”

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