

## Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London

The Revd Lindsay Meader

Remembrance Sunday 13 November 2016 Evening Service

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23



### In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
between the crosses, row on row,  
that mark our place; and in the sky  
the larks, still bravely singing, fly  
scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago  
we lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
the torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
we shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.

(John McCrae, May 1915)

Last month, I found myself surprised to be standing on the very spot from which the First World War was triggered. I shouldn't really have been surprised. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was something I learned about way-back-when in school, but although I'd taken a connecting flight from Heathrow through Munich knowing my destination, it was only during the walking orientation of Sarajevo, on the first afternoon of our intensive four day trip, that I made the connection.

The assassination site, from where the war to end all wars was triggered that led to our wearing poppies as a symbol of remembrance and marking Armistice Day at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, is on the corner of a side road and the main but quiet road which runs alongside the river Drina. The corner building is an innocuous pink museum, dedicated to the killing of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and his wife by a Serbian nationalist in June 1914.

My surprise came because we travelled to Sarajevo not to focus on the world-changing event that sparked the Great War, but rather to learn about another, later war, and the terrible suffering of the Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) during the Bosnian war from 1992-1995. We (the 'we' being myself and Jo, our former churchwarden and editor of our magazine) had come to learn about the siege of Sarajevo and the Srebrenica genocide.

On Remembrance Sunday, we remember not just the two World Wars, but lament that others have followed. We lament that an integrated, seemingly successful society which saw Orthodox,

Roman Catholic and Muslims living side by side and even inter-marrying, could and did descend into savage and bloody chaos, and genocide.

In our four days in Bosnia, we learned first-hand from survivors who told us first-hand of the 47 month long siege of Sarajevo and of the genocide at Srebrenica, when 8,372 Bosniak men and boys were massacred in the space of a few terrible, savage days in July 1995. The systematic mass rape of up to 20,000 women was another appalling aspect of the conflict. It has been described as the worst crime on European soil since the Second World War.

We learned how only a couple of weeks after the shelling started in Sarajevo, suddenly all the Serbs disappeared from the city overnight. Their Bosniak neighbours literally woke to find them gone, vanished without trace. We were told of how, through the hatemongers such as Radovan Karadžić, Slobodan Milošević and Ratko Mladić, who spoke in the rhetoric of ‘them and us’, fear spread like contagion and the Bosniaks were demonised, as their former neighbours took up arms and turned against them.

The delegation was intensive, and at times harrowing and heart-breaking. We visited museums and exhibitions in Sarajevo, and in the area surrounding Srebrenica, the former Dutch battalion UN base which became central to the genocide and right opposite, across the road, the Potočari memorial cemetery, home to over 6000 graves. Resad, our guide for the whole trip, is a citizen of Sarajevo who aged 19, spent what he says should have been his “wild years” defending his city in the Bosniak army.

We met Hasan, who aged 19, joined the Death March – the long column of thousands of desperate men and boys who walked for three days through the hills in a bid to reach Bosniak-controlled territory. “The Column” was shelled and many killed, others were captured or were duped in surrendering at the promise of no harm, only to be led to their deaths. Hasan survived and made it to safety, but lost his father, uncle and twin brother. We met Nedžad, who aged 17 was one of only two survivors from a mass execution of 2000. He was shot several times, but the Serb soldiers failed to notice that miraculously, somehow he was still alive. We also met Myeera, who lost her husband, three sons and grandson, and now lives alone with her memories.

It was a very sobering and strange experience to spend time in a city that looks normal and fully functioning, where the facades of blocks of flats are pockmarked and riddled with bullet holes, knowing that only 21 years ago it looked not unlike Aleppo today, the buildings burned and bombed out, the streets bearing numerous craters from mortars. As the horrors of the Bosnian war unfolded, the world looked on, cognisant of much, if not all, of what was happening, and yet did not, or did not know how to, intervene. Today, we see some of the horrors of history repeating itself in Syria, as once more the world looks on, seemingly not knowing how to intervene. How many more “never again”s?

We also visited two International Missing Persons Commission DNA identification facilities - a laboratory and a morgue - and learned of the processes involved in identifying the bodies still being recovered from mass graves over 20 years on. Sterling work has been done in bringing vital closure to those who have been waiting for years to find out what became of their missing loved ones. Despite the painful confirmation that they were indeed victims of the genocide and won't ever return, there is nonetheless considerable comfort in finally being able to hold a funeral, and to have a grave to visit, a tangible link to honour their lost loved ones. On trips such

as this, which are utterly immersive, you very quickly learn a new vocabulary, and one of the phrases which I heard repeatedly during our time there was that of 'disarticulated remains'.

Because the Serbs would often use bulldozers to relocate mass graves, it is not uncommon for the remains of a person to be recovered from multiple sites. In some cases, only a few bones – or even a single bone - may ever be recovered and identified. The introduction of DNA techniques rapidly accelerated the number of identifications per year – from 40 or 50 a year to 500 or 600 – but there are still over a thousand bodies missing and it is likely that there are still at least two mass graves yet to be located.

We asked each survivor what message they wanted us to take home from our trip. Their reply was especially urgent in the light of the current disturbing trends in world politics and the events of this week: "Don't let hate take hold. As soon as you hear the words 'them' and 'us; it's time to act.'" "Don't let that happen, because that how it starts and we know where that can lead."

In the parable of the sower, Jesus is telling his followers how we must be fertile soil for the word of God, open and receptive. It more important than ever that we recognise that fertile soil can also be used to grow weeds. We must tend the soil of our hearts and souls, to ensure we nourish always and only words of life and peace, and never those of hatred and division.

I came home more aware than ever that war results not only in disarticulated remains - disarticulated bones and bodies, but in disarticulated hearts, disarticulated souls and minds, disarticulated households and communities.

So I close with an extract from a poem by Bosnian poet Jasmin Jusuf Jusufović

I once lived in a house  
under a sloped roof.  
I used to herd goats and sheep in the morning,  
I ran after my older brothers  
begging them to show me their schools,  
I used to ruffle my father's feathers,  
begging him to teach me how to repair trucks.  
The roof on our house had not had even five winter snows  
when our neighbor came knocking on the door, to say that our house was no longer ours.  
I was still too young  
to realize that a man with a gun  
cannot bluff.  
Hungry goats and sheep,  
Unfinished schools,  
A truck in disrepair,  
My mother's knitted handicrafts, and dinners...  
unfinished, uneaten:  
all of them stolen by a soulless man  
claiming the right to our trapped dreams  
and things that were all new to him.  
After that, we knew  
we would have nothing of our own

except for glances, intertwined fingers, and  
shelters in breasts which held  
a quivering heart fearing petrification  
in the face of hopes, dreams, and prayers.  
Soon afterwards, father lost his hair,  
mother forgot how to knit, and  
the oldest brother—the one who went to faculty—  
decided to stand up against evil.  
Mother begged him: Do not leave, dear son, for  
you might kill someone.  
“I won’t take a gun, mother  
I am leaving to heal wounds,  
I am going to carry water.”  
Father looked into his eyes,  
bit into his lip, and turned his tear filled eyes towards the dark.  
My brother closed the door, and mother  
started, in whispers, to count the rest of us.  
Suddenly, as if the whole mountain collapsed,  
as if someone had blackened the Sun,  
they took, in front of our eyes, our father, and  
the rest of my brothers.  
And ever since then,  
July,  
Summers,  
Tuesdays  
are not the same.  
My mother could recognize the neighbors  
they invaded her with their hateful looks.  
In a stranger’s world, at the window,  
mother was continuously whispering  
and calling for the names:  
giving them to the wind,  
weeping and gradually fading.  
And so she still does, even after an entire generation has come to an end.  
They want to repair my house,  
and yet, they wonder why my mother and I need a big house,  
but I have no words to explain to a stranger  
how that house raised seven people,  
stout and fearless,  
who had big dreams, able to fit into four rooms.  
And now, I am afraid of my own people.  
Will I cope with it, or will I die  
’cause Goodness is our Curse,  
I won’t be able to  
keep the doors latched when the neighbor  
comes again, knocking.  
And after all the struggle,  
I have to stay strong  
and give the news to my mother, and tell her

that the only thing they are bringing to her now,  
out of all of our five murdered family members,  
are two bones.

Lindsay Meader

Let us pray:

God of peace, we come before you tonight  
lamenting the terrible suffering inflicted by war,  
by the conflicts which begin with rumours of division  
and explode into hatred and the worst of which humankind is capable.

We pray for all those, in the two World Wars and in subsequent and  
ongoing conflicts who have been killed, maimed, traumatized or bereaved.  
We remember particularly this night, those men and women who have died in active service:  
as we honour their courage and cherish their memory, may we put our faith in your future,  
for you are the source of life and hope, now and forever.

We pray for those displaced, dispossessed and haunted by memories  
of times now far beyond reach and people who were snatched away, never to return.  
Give them strength as they seek to rebuild their lives in unfamiliar places.

We give thanks for the courage and service of all our veterans,  
for those who bear the scars and wounds of war in their bodies and minds.  
We pray for your protection for all our servicemen and women currently posted far from home  
and we pray your comfort for the loved ones who wait and pray for their safe return.

We pray for those who wage war, that you would show them another way;  
we pray for those in positions of political power and influence that  
they may strive for justice, mercy and peace.

Speak to us this night, O God,  
speak peace where nations meet,  
justice where ideas clash,  
mercy where power reigns,  
healing where minds and bodies hurt  
and love where people yearn for unity.

Show us this night, O God,  
the peace we should seek,  
the peace we must give,  
the peace we can keep,  
the peace we must forgo  
and the peace you have given  
in Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

Amen.