



8 November 2020
Remembrance Sunday
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Dr John Russell

*May I speak in the name of God – Creator,
Christ and Holy Spirit.*

As we enter November, so we enter the Church's season of remembrance. Last Sunday, we celebrated the Feast of All Saints, when we remembered the men and women whose lives bear witness to the gospel. On Monday evening, we marked All Souls Day when we remembered those we have loved and lost. And today we mark Remembrance Sunday, when we commemorate all those injured and killed during war and especially the contribution of British and Commonwealth military and civilian servicemen and women in the two World Wars and subsequent conflicts.

And the lectionary – in its wisdom – offers us the story of the ten bridesmaids – five of them wise, and five of them foolish. Another example of the polarizing in-group out-group device that the evangelist Matthew is especially fond of. Back in July, we had the wheat and the weeds; in a few weeks' time we'll hear the parable of the sheep and the goats. They are all variations on the same rhetorical technique: they urge the listener to be like one group and not

like the other group. Because one group is joining the glorious wedding banquet of the kingdom of God, and the other is being condemned to the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Biblical commentators often seem to interpret the parable of the bridesmaids as some sort of a scriptural version of Aesop's fable of the ant and the grasshopper. The frivolous grasshopper spends the summer singing and dancing while the industrious ant works to store up food for winter. When the cold weather arrives, the grasshopper finds itself dying of hunger and begs the ant for food. However, the ant rebukes the idleness of the foolish grasshopper and tells the poor creature to dance the winter away. Thus we learn about the virtues of hard work and the perils of improvidence.

But to me, the most outstanding feature about the bridesmaids is how *alike* the two groups are. We're told from the outset that 5 are wise and 5 are foolish but throughout the parable their behaviour is strikingly similar. All ten bridesmaids are invited to

the wedding party. All ten pick up their lamps and go to meet the bridegroom. When the groom is delayed, all ten become drowsy and sleep. When the arrival of the bridegroom is announced, all ten awaken and trim their lamps. And all ten bridesmaids correctly recognise the Lord.

The difference between the two groups rests solely on the fact that the wise bridesmaids appear to anticipate a potential delay in the groom's arrival and take an extra flask of oil with them, and are therefore better prepared to wait for the beginning of the feast. And that when God is late for his own party and they are invited to share their oil with their anxious comrades, in a spectacular failure of Christian sharing, they refuse and send their sisters out at midnight to shops which they surely must know to be shut.

It's a remarkably slender and enigmatic distinction and it's not at all clear what the extra oil is supposed to represent. What is the thing that a wise person carefully stockpiles in order to guarantee eternal happiness and joy, but cannot share with a neighbour in need? Is it faith? Is it prayer? Is it good deeds? In the present emergency, as we begin another national lockdown, could it be *toilet paper*?

Especially in the context of Remembrance Sunday it is the human commonality between all the bridesmaids that draws me in. Each of us brings different memories, thoughts and feelings to our service of remembrance. Some of you will have served in the forces. Some of you bring memories of civilian life during wartime. Some of you lived through the Blitz. Some you remember when no-where on mainland Britain was safe from IRA bombs. Some of you will remember the London tube bombings of 2005. Some of you bring memories of those whom you have loved and lost. Some of you bring a long commitment to peace and working for peace based upon justice. Whatever our memories and feelings about war and conflict we bring them here with us, which helps makes our service of remembrance more comprehensive.

Because we are not here today to glorify war or the supremacy of this or any other country – however wise or foolish we consider them to be – but rather to express our repentance and sorrow for war and violence, and our heartfelt yearning for something better to replace it as a means of resolving human differences; to resist the aggressive culture of political polarization that is tearing at the seams of democracies in the UK, the US, Poland, India – all around the globe.

There is a French film called – in English - *The Guardians* that came out a few years ago, directed by Xavier Beauvois. It's about the life of the women of a farming community in Western France during the First World War, while the men are away fighting.

In one scene, for the benefit of a soldier on leave, some school children sing a patriotic French song that pours scorn on the German enemy. They call them 'the boche', (as in England we called the Germans Krauts, or the Hun) and they sing about how dull and brutish and violent the Germans are, whereas the French represent everything that is courageous and beautiful and holy.

But later in the film another soldier on leave challenges this demonization of the enemy. The Germans are not bloodthirsty monsters, he says. They are factory workers, teachers and farmers – just like us. In one day of fighting the French gain 10 metres of mud from the Germans; and the next day they lose it back again. And the vicious futility of the trench warfare drives him to drink.

And a third soldier on leave in the village dreams one night of mowing down lines of Germans with a machine-gun, and scuffling

with a masked enemy who he violently stabs to death. But when he pulls off his dead foe's gas mask, he sees his own lifeless double staring back at him – and then wakes up screaming.

So we remember those who fought for this country in the First World war over 100 years ago, and for all those people killed or injured in more recent conflicts around the world, whether eager volunteers or reluctant conscripts.

We remember the contribution made by Black Britons in both the world wars, so often overlooked and unrepresented, and we repent for the appalling racism they endured, and how – once the wars were over, and there was a renewed competition for jobs – our fickle gratitude so quickly gave way to racial discrimination.

We remember the shell-shocked teenage soldiers who fled from the trenches of the First World War and were court-martialled for desertion and executed by firing squads of their own friends, and waited 90 years to be posthumously pardoned.

We remember especially the armed forces veterans in this country who are today struggling to return to civilian life – the 50,000 former servicemen and women suffering with mental health problems, the

10,000 who have been imprisoned, the 6,000 who are homeless. We remember the veterans who make the poppies and the other remembrance memorabilia that charities produce because one of the main reasons these charities exist is to provide work to former service personnel from more recent conflicts who we may be happy to honour for their service to our country but no one seems to want to employ them.

We are here to pray for all have suffered and still suffer as a result of war, and for all who are working around the world for peace based on justice and freedom.

And to hold fast to our faith in Christ's victory over death; that death may put an end to our physical existence but not to our friendship with God. That – as Paul writes in his letter to the Thessalonians - all the people who lived before us and who are now not among us are living to God, and she has a purpose for us which extends far beyond the narrow limits of our life on earth, and at the end of days, the living and the dead will be caught up in the clouds together and all shall be alive in the Lord.

And I'll finish with a prayer from *The Guardians*, from a scene in the small French village church where the people are gathered to hear the roll-call of the local

war dead – a prayer for our military service personnel past and present, and a prayer for us all in the present emergency:

Blessed Mary in your heavenly abode

Do not forget the sadness here on earth.

Look kindly upon those who are suffering, those who are fighting, for whom life has left a bitter taste in the mouth.

Have pity on those who have loved and been separated.

Have pity on our lonely hearts, our wavering faith.

Have pity on those who cry, those who shout, those who suffer, those who tremble.

Give them all hope and peace.

Amen