

Kensington Town Hall,

Princess Louise's Regimental Remembrance Service

Micah 4:1-5

Matthew 18:1-5

'Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'

I was talking to a parishioner a few weeks ago, while walking to the doctors' surgery in the basement of this building, where we were hoping to get treatment for one of his children. So far, so normal, except this parishioner had recently arrived in Kensington from Afghanistan.

He described to me the scenes at Kabul airport, while he and his family had waited to leave a few weeks beforehand. Women and babies were crushed to death. The Taliban soldiers overseeing the crowds would occasionally beat those on the periphery.

His children asked what the sound of the intermittent gunfire on the edge of the crowd was. Scared himself, he was more concerned for his children's wellbeing, and told them that they were fireworks for someone's birthday. And so, every time gunfire was heard, his children got excited, asking him whose birthday it was. He would smile, masking his own fear for their sake.

He went on to tell me that they got to the front of the queue, after four days, just as the processing point was being closed, but that a British soldier took pity on them, opened the gate, and took them in, so that the following day they could board a flight.

The British soldiers, he told me, were far kinder than the Americans.

It is something of a cliché to speak of how we only use armed force now for self-defence or to keep the peace.

And yet the day, as we heard in our first reading, when *'they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks'* feels no nearer than when that passage was written down, some 2,700 years ago.

When Jesus says *'unless you change and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven'*, He is not being naïve, for elsewhere He tells us that we should be cunning as a serpent.

But we must retain the hope and the idealism of a child in order to make the world a better place.

The situation in Afghanistan is of course desperately depressing, and we are seeing the effects of the end of operations there here in Kensington, as we try to help the 8- or 900 who have been housed here.

I know the Kensingtons served honourably as part of that campaign, and I can only imagine how it must have felt having done so, watching the Taliban's swift return to power across the country.

It would be very easy to let our cynical side take over.

And yet, even in the flight from Kabul, my friend's story of the kindness of one British soldier provides a ray of hope for us.

'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'

That soldier at Kabul airport might have been forgiven had he been hardened by the despair and chaos which surrounded him.

And yet, he saw the opportunity to help one family, including those children whom their father had been trying so hard to shield from fear - and he welcomed them. In so doing, he welcomed them to our country, something we continue to do in Kensington, and indeed in this very building, as the doctors and practice staff dropped everything to register them and see to their needs.

As Christians we believe that in welcoming that family, that soldier, and those who have done so since, are indeed welcoming Jesus into their, into our, midst.

The actions of that soldier show us the values of love, service and fortitude, as well as hope, which I believe in as a priest, but which I do not think are limited to us Christians. They are values which the British Army and the Kensingtons seem to embody at their best.

The professionalism, courage and personal strength which all soldiers on operation in Afghanistan must have required was demonstrated by that soldier: how else could he have held it together, and worked with so many others to impose some order in the chaos of that airport?

But in the midst of that, he also showed compassion and service of the *highest* kind, and of a kind which will outlive all of the other emotions which surround that withdrawal.

What you all stand for transcends the operational goals of any one campaign. You stand for sacrifice for others: Queen and country, and one another, yes; but increasingly, given the deployments of the last 30 years, for all of our fellow men, women and children.

And I think I can repeat the thanks of my friend for that service; dedication; and, yes, though it may not be a word you would naturally reach for to represent what you do and stand for as soldiers, but love.

And for that I give thanks to God. Amen