

13th November, Remembrance Sunday Service
Ecclesiasticus 44:1-14 and John 15: 9-17
Mother Emma

Over the past couple of years, this Church and this Borough have worked with others to welcome refugees fleeing from war and terror in Afghanistan and in Ukraine.

At our primary school Eucharist on Thursday on the theme of Remembrance, I was painfully conscious that this year for many of us - from the little faces in front of me to those of my own generation who may be present today – this Remembrance season feels somehow different. During that school service, I knew, and the children knew, that there were several Ukrainian refugee children in the congregation, and possibly some of their parents – families who had witnessed at first hand the terror of a country at war, and who may have left behind loved ones fighting at the front.

School Remembrance services generally take the form of explaining why it is important we remember the (for children, at least) distant wars of previous centuries and generations and work to maintain the peace which has prevailed in this country for many years. Yet this year the reality of war itself felt closer and more immediate. My talk to the children now centred around the need to pray, not only for those who had died in the past or been wounded in battle, but also for those who continue to fight, day by day, under terrifying circumstances, at this very moment.

Of course, there are those present in our congregation today who will still vividly and painfully remember the wars of the twentieth century, or who are conscious that the lives of their families were permanently scarred by the losses they suffered.

There are also those taking part in this commemoration who have seen active service in more recent conflicts in Iraq or Afghanistan - or in other place where our armed forces have sought to create or keep the peace in areas of conflict or instability - as well as those whose relatives and friends still our country as members of those armed forces today.

We are called each November to remember that the decades of peace enjoyed – and possibly even taken for granted – by modern generations, have been upheld not only by those who fought against the great evils of the twentieth century, but those who through being deployed as peacekeepers in many frightening situations since then, have prevented war from touching us in this country. We are all aware of what we owe to them, but as the years go by perhaps they have seemed – particularly for children – to be a bit remote.

Yet now for the many who have never had to face the horrors, the losses and the trauma close to, meeting and speaking with the refugees who have so recently fled the theatre of war has been a shocking experience which brings today's ceremonies, rituals and prayers vividly alive.

Speaking personally, when some months ago, I met a Ukrainian woman who had recently arrived in Kensington, leaving her 26-year-old son fighting on the frontline in Ukraine, I found the thought of my own 26-year-old son suddenly aroused a particularly painful sense of empathy. I was humbled by the realisation of my lack of direct experience as I lead acts and services of Remembrance.

This week I was reminded that it is ten years since Gareth Malone, the celebrity choir director, set out to build a choir from the wives of servicemen deployed in Afghanistan, women who had remained behind with their families on a military base in Devon. During the series we were drawn into the experiences of these women who live in constant fear for their loved ones, trying to maintain a reasonable semblance of normality for their families. Gradually we became aware of how much anxiety was concealed beneath the surface, and how this had adversely affected the wives' own sense of self-confidence. But perhaps most poignant of all was the episode when Gareth took his newly formed choir to sing in the local market town, in which the majority of inhabitants admitted

they knew nothing about the base, had never met its inhabitants, and had no idea that Royal Marines from there were being sent to Afghanistan.

Today we honour all those who have died in wars across the globe and especially those whose sacrifice has enabled us to live in peace, and perhaps - to our shame - to be relatively protected from the knowledge of what they and their families have suffered and continue to suffer to this day.

The closeness of the war in Europe this year, and the intimacy of meeting and interacting with those for whom it has been a recent and searing reality is an important reminder that we cannot simply rely on the sacrifice of those in years gone by, but must work actively for a world of peace.

Besides honouring the fallen, the injured and the bereaved, we have the opportunity today to pray with renewed insight for the ceasing of hostilities and conflict around the world; for those who work to bring peace, whether as peacekeepers or peacemakers and for God's gift of healing and reconciliation amidst the darkness of human violence, greed and hatred.

We are here to give heartfelt thanks for all whose sacrifice has made possible our own lives of peace and relative security.

We pray today for those who continue to bear arms on behalf of our nation, that they may have both courage and compassion, and we also give thanks for all who strive for peace and who fight for justice, in all nations of the world.

We ask, too, that those who have experienced the devastation and anguish of conflict can teach younger generations to strive constantly for a better tomorrow.

As we remember with new insight the enormity of our debt to our Armed Forces and those who have maintained peace in our lifetimes, we might recall the words of the Kohimar Epitaph, spoken by the young, lost generation who gave their lives in the service of their country and in the cause of peace:

When you go home
Tell them of us and say
For your tomorrow
We gave our today.

Amen