

## Remembrance Sunday 2023

### Mother Emma

*“God is love;”* writes St John, *“and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.”*

We come together today in love, to remember and to honour all who have fallen in the fight for justice and in the cause of peace. We hold in our hearts the young lives lost and maimed in acts of terror and of war all across the world, over the past 109 years since the start of the First World War, widely characterized at the time as *“the war to end all wars”*.

Tragically, human nature continues to make that contemporary belief into false optimism, though we can still share in the real hope of God’s promised kingdom of peace, as described in our first reading from the prophecy of Micah. We find ourselves at the current time in a new situation, as we come before God, once again conscious of the violence and horror which human beings continue to perpetrate upon one another, and in the humble recognition that every one of us carries within ourselves the seeds of prejudice and hostility which can fuel the fires of conflict.

For years I have prepared to preach on Remembrance Sunday by turning to old war films and documentaries on the Yesterday channel, or by looking at contemporary poetry, art or literature from the time of the two World Wars, in order to sense something of what was experienced by those whom we honour on this important day. I remember feeling both fascinated and put to shame by the programme produced by Gareth Malone about his choir of military wives, women left behind with their struggles and fears on a barracks barely noticed by the communities which surrounded them. As for many of my fortunate generation, war seemed a distant thing and whilst we remembered and honoured all who had died in the service of their country, the majority of us had to use our imaginations to stand alongside them in their suffering.

Of course, as Gareth Malone highlighted, there have always been courageous young men and women from our Armed Forces who were deployed across the world, most recently in Iraq or Afghanistan, or as peacekeepers with the UN in a variety of dangerous and unpredictable places, people who deserved huge respect; but this was not war as our grandparents had experienced it.

Then, last year, I found myself for the first time preaching against a backdrop of war in Europe, something we had hoped and trusted would never happen again. Ukrainian refugees arrived in our own Borough and in this community, traumatized and terrified by the results of conflict, some of them speaking to me of the husbands and sons they had left behind on the front line, and we were drawn into their experiences in a new way. For almost two years, we have watched this war, with all its destruction and heartache, courage and loss, without, as yet, seeing an end in sight. And now this year, we once again watch terrifying footage of horrific acts of terror, and of the cost of destruction and warfare

on innocent civilians, on our television screens, our social media and in our newspapers, whilst the anger and fear created by this violence pours out onto our own streets. For those of us outside the close-knit family of the Armed Forces, war has suddenly moved from the Yesterday channel to real time, from far away to close at hand, and perhaps this year, the experience of all deployed on active service, or living as civilians in wartime, has become more poignant, more vivid to us all.

Remembrance Sunday has always provided an opportunity for us to give thanks to and for those who serve our country, protecting us from harm, upholding the values of freedom and justice which we hold dear, playing their part in international efforts to build peace across the world. We do that today with our whole hearts, many of us with recent descriptions or images of active service or of civilian suffering etched in our minds, with a new respect, and also a new grief.

God has promised us, as Micah describes, a world of peace and stability; a world in which it is he alone who rebukes and judges the nations, and who calls us as individuals and as countries to turn our swords into ploughshares, creating industry, prosperity and hope from the deadly instruments of war. It is not for us to judge, it is for us to reach out in love and generosity to our neighbours, to bring hope and comfort in the midst of darkness and violence.

The Beatitudes, which we heard in our second reading and which lie at the heart of Jesus' teaching, remind us that God's world is counter-cultural. The blessed in the Kingdom of Heaven are not the strong, the powerful, the ambitious, or those who trample on others in their path. They are the meek, the poor in spirit, the grieving, the merciful, the pure ... and the peacemakers.

I have often been struck, when speaking with members of the Armed Forces, by their humility and compassion towards their adversaries. They show respect and honour, as we show for them today; men and women on the front line, or serving as peacekeepers, who understand that their ultimate goal is to achieve peace and freedom and safety, and not to enact vengeance or punishment.

We give thanks for them and for all that they have done in the service of our country, and of worldwide peace, and we grieve with those they have left behind, or who now share in the suffering caused by life-changing injuries or trauma. And we pray, on this day of all days, we may share the teachings of Christ, that to be close to God's heart is to be a loving peacemaker, to be humble, merciful and compassionate, to bring to the world the vision of hope and comfort described by Micah.

Then, as God promises, we too shall experience a world in which nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. **Amen**