Sunday 8 November – Remembrance Sunday

Sermon by the Right Reverend Roger Morris, the Bishop of Colchester

As it is café church from St. Luke's, there is no sermon from there for this week. Instead, the Diocesan sermon is shown below and can be listened to at Weekly Sermons from the Diocese of Chelmsford.

The UK government has advised households to prepare for severe disruption, to stockpile canned food and drinking water, to strengthen our civic resilience and to plan for the possibility of war. It says we should be "alert - not alarmed."

The truth is that there are now more conflicts, more wars, than at any point since the end of the Second World War. The number of countries involved in external conflict has nearly doubled since 2008. The civil war in Sudan, the protracted conflict in Ukraine, and the ongoing conflict between Israel, the United States and Iran have left the world in a more fragile and militarised state than at any point since the cold war ended. The Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Richard Knighton, said in September that the threat from Russia meant Britain was living through the "most dangerous" period of his 35-year career in the armed forces.

War in which we as a nation are more actively involved is not inevitable, but it is certainly not out of the question.

And yet today I want to say something about hope.

Now you might say, "Roger, there are no signs of hope. In fact it's all looking pretty hopeless…"

Well, this is the thing about hope. We do not get to hope by extrapolating from how things are. As Saint Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, 'we hope for what we do not see.' For me, hope is about believing that good will triumph over evil; that right will prevail; that the good things God has in store for us will come even though the world offers no visible proof to support this. Hope then is an act of the imagination. We refuse to accept that the way things are is the way they shall always be. And we dare to envision a world that is very different from this one. Like Isaiah the Prophet who, in the midst of war and destruction, described a world in which people shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. Now either he was deluded, or he was on to something.

The job of a prophet, so the American writer Walter Brueggeman tells us, is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us. The prophet, he says, “offers us the ready, steady, surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age”. It doesn’t have to be this way.

The Reverend Dr Martin Luther King used Isaiah’s words when he spoke of his dream. “I have a dream. I have a dream that one day people shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” God encourages us to dream – to see the future through his eyes – to look forward to that day when his glory shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

Martin Luther King said, “If you lose hope, somehow you lose the vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of it all.” And so – he said “today… I still have a dream.”

And that approach only really makes sense if you allow hope to redefine your take on reality. If you have the audacity to believe that what you hope for is really real. You see – that is what hope is. It is daring to confront the present situation with the idea, the invitation, in fact, the presupposition that a better world truly exists.

Now if that is all there was to it then hope would just be a concept like pie in the sky when you die, but there's more because hope transplants us from our current situation into the reality of the better world that we long for and we then live in the light of that new reality. Pope Benedict the 16th said, “The Christian message – the message of hope - is not only ‘informative’ but performative’. That means the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known – it is one that makes things happen and is life changing.” “The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open,” he said, “The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.”

Let us then dare to live differently and that means acting differently too. Hope is not a passive thing. Denise Inge, the late wife of a former Bishop of Worcester said, “Hope is not the same thing as optimism. Optimism says that things will get better. Hope says that the good we envisage is the good we work towards. Optimism is largely passive: it is about waiting for what is better to come to you. Hope is active: it goes out and does. It falls and fails sometimes, but it is tenacious and unafraid, and it survives long after

optimism is dashed. Optimism daydreams; Hope has confidence. It is awake. It will not let go of the notion that the good is real and that we can find it."

We hope for what we do not see, and as we hope - as we believe - as we dream of a better tomorrow, so we begin to live in the reality that we long for; searching out the good, rejoicing in the small acts of kindness, or - as the Canadian singer songwriter Bruce Cockburn puts it – "kicking at the darkness till it bleeds daylight."

And – do you know - the world is not entirely devoid of little signs of hope, of hints of goodness, of tiny gestures of peace. Little indications – encouragements - that our hope may not be in vain.

The writer James Baldwin said, "There may not be as much humanity in the world as one would like to see. But there is some. There's more than one would think…"

On Remembrance Sunday, good women and men and children right across the country gather at memorials, pay tribute to the fallen and pledge to work for peace. There is humanity here, more than one would think.

So, at this time of remembrance, maybe despite what is happening in the world, maybe because of it, may we dare to hope. And as we hope for a better more peaceful world, may we live in such a way as to make THAT world the reality in which we are pleased to live.

Peace be with you.