**Remembrance Sunday – 10th November 2024**

**Reading – Mark 1, v14-20**

In 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War, a twenty-five-year-old South African named Percy Fitzpatrick, a former student at Oxford, volunteered for military service. He saw service in some of the most ferocious battles of the war, including the Battle of the Somme.

On 14th December 1917, Fitzpatrick, now an acting Major, was sadly killed, aged 28. His father, Sir Percy Fitzpatrick senior wanted to do something significant to mark the death of his son and so he planted memorial trees on his land, however he wanted to do more.

Sir Percy had been impressed by a one-minute silence kept in his local church in 1916 after the South African casualty list had been read out. The date and time of the Armistice – the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month – inspired Sir Percy Fitzpatrick to suggest an annual commemoration.  His suggestion was forwarded to the King, George V, who then issued a ‘call to the nation’ at the beginning of November 1919 asking that –

“For the brief space of two minutes, there be a complete suspension of all normal activities…to perpetuate the memory of the Great Deliverance, and of those who laid down their lives to achieve it.”

 The first minute’s silence is intended as a thanksgiving for those who have survived. The second minute is to remember the fallen. And so, on 11th November 1919, the Armistice Day silence was officially observed for the first time. We continue that tradition today, over a century later, on Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday - today.

This annual act of remembrance gathers together communities across the nation and in many other countries too. As well as the sacrifices of the past, we remember that men and women of today’s armed services continue to make extraordinary sacrifices – sometimes the ultimate sacrifice – in the cause of peace and for the preservation of freedom and justice.

There are many reasons why people come to church services on Remembrance Sunday and those folk will have a variety of thoughts and emotions on this day.

I've been reflecting on Remembrance and it struck me that something very important is the fact that human life is a unique and irreplaceable gift, and therefore of infinite value.

Our lives are not simply the outcome of a blind evolutionary process or the product of our upbringing and experiences.

Our lives are a unique gift from God. If we truly understand that, knowing that we are 'fearfully and wonderfully made', as it says in Psalm 139, it should determine how we live and what we do in the world - because our life is not ours to do with simply as we please.

Understanding that our life is a gift means that life has meaning in the way that any gift has meaning. We need to think carefully and seriously about what we do with the gift of our lives – how we treasure it, enjoy it and to what ends we live it.

The men and women whom we remember today, the millions killed in armed conflict, who had been given that gift of life, gave that gift of their lives in the cause of justice and peace. Each one of those lives is a unique and irreplaceable gift. Seeing the figures displayed at Stowe - Standing with Giants - 1,475 silhouettes of Second World War military personnel (the number of British servicemen who were killed on D-Day, 80 years ago), really brought home to me the fact that they were each unique individuals, who were treasured and loved by their families and friends.

So, we have an important duty and responsibility today - to be peacemakers and thereby ensure that they did not give their lives in vain.

The fallen men and women whom we remember with pride, thanksgiving and grief today, gave the gift of their lives to what they believed was the cause of freedom, justice and peace.

In the light of those who made the ultimate sacrifice in giving the gift of their lives on the battlefield, I think it important that today, on Remembrance Sunday, we reflect on and ask ourselves what it is that we are living for. They gave their lives for us.  What are we giving our lives for?

That same question arose in my mind just the other day. I was reading an interview with Sir Chris Hoy - the Olympic cyclist - who has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. He described each and every day as being a gift and wanting to make the most of it. That's such an inspiring approach - and there's a lesson there for everyone - every day is a gift - a gift from God - and we should make the most of it and use our time in the right way.

And that takes us to today's Gospel reading from Mark.

In our reading, we hear of the disciples, Simon/Peter and Andrew, James and John, fishermen who leave their nets, and choose to follow Jesus. That was brave and courageous of each one of them – they were taking a step into the unknown, trusting and having faith in Jesus.

The gentle scenes of fishing and the mending of nets paints an idyllic scene but Jesus will call the disciples and lead them into difficult, challenging and frightening experiences.

In the face of impending hostility Jesus doesn’t build an army, he builds a loving community.

Those disciples responded to Jesus' call - their lives were truly transformed, and they went on to transform the lives of millions of others, as they built and grew the early church.

Just like He called the disciples, Jesus today calls individuals to come and follow him. It’s not a call to go and fight for a nation - it's a call to live and serve in a new radical way, as people of a heavenly kingdom, doing our best to love God and to love our neighbours, serving others and sharing the Good News and in doing so be peacemakers.

On the Altar in the church, we see the cross – the place where Jesus died. The cross shows us the depth of God’s love for us – the tremendous length, depth, and height of the love of God for all of us.  For God is love. Jesus’ death on the cross and laying down his life for us, sets us the example by which we should live for one another - serving and loving each other, as members of a peace-making and loving community.

As we remember and reflect on this Remembrance Sunday, we are invited to be part of that loving and peace-making community too.  At a time when we struggle with the rise in nationalism around Europe and elsewhere, when there conflicts and tensions throughout the world, that call to be peacemakers, centred on the love of Christ, seems more urgent and important than ever.

So, on Remembrance Sunday, as we honour the sacrifice of previous generations and of members of our military more recently, it's important to remember that we have a challenge today - how should we best use our lives - that precious gift from God - to follow Jesus, to serve others and to be peacemakers and shining lights in our communities today.

We are lucky to be alive - let's make the most of it, living our lives as disciples of Jesus.

Dave Pearce