



8 November 2015 – Remembrance Sunday

Preacher: Leslie Griffiths

Hymns: 132 “O God, our help in ages past”
 157 “God has spoken – by his prophets”
 698 “God! As with silent hearts we bring to mind”
 645 “Will your anchor hold in the storms of life!”

Readings: Romans 12:9-21
 Matthew 5:43-48

**THE PAST NEEDS TO BE REMEMBERED
IN ORDER TO BE FORGOTTEN [Paul Tillich]**

Both our passages from Scripture this morning ask us to do the impossible. Jesus tells us that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us; St Paul tells us how futile it is to repay evil with evil, that we'd do better to pray for those who persecute us and that the very best way to treat an enemy is, when he's hungry, to feed him and, when he's thirsty, to give him something to drink. This is what he calls the noble way to live.

With all that in mind, and taking a phrase from the writings of the theologian Paul Tillich, I want to remember a time of persecution not in order to stir up hostile passion but to equip us for the task of living nobly, in harmony with one another in the hope that evil might be overcome with good.

We nearing the 75th anniversary of an event that could have had fateful consequences for this place. Just listen to a newspaper description of what happened on December 29th 1940:

The enemy chose tonight, a Sunday, to try to set fire to the City of London. The raid had clearly been planned with typical thoroughness. It was timed to coincide with the tidal low-point in the Thames, and the water mains were severed at the outset by high explosive parachute mines. Then at least 10,000 fire bombs were unloaded.

For a time the fires raged out of control, as firemen were unable to use the mains supply or pump water from the Thames. When the water came on again, pumped from more distant mains, the exhaust pipes of fire engines became red hot through the continued high pressure pumping by 20,000 firemen.

They were later reinforced by soldiers and civilians. In a dramatic incident an unknown soldier lost his life. He was an old soldier; no stripes, just many ribbons. He and a fireman were playing a hose on a 60-foot high wall engulfed in flames when it crashed down, burying them both beneath tons of bricks.



Luckily for the City, the raid was broken off just when the enemy seemed to be winning.

This graphic report indicates that this was, indeed, a dreadful night. One of the best-known icons of the World War came out of it, a photograph of St. Paul's Cathedral shrouded in the smoke and dust of the moment yet standing tall and defiant against the night sky. Twenty eight incendiary bombs fell on or near St. Paul's that night. A high-explosive bomb penetrated the dome and, mercifully, fell under its own weight onto the Stone Gallery where it was extinguished comparatively easily. The bombings went on nightly for many more months but that picture, taken as it was when things were at their very worst, illustrated perfectly the indomitable spirit of a people determined not to give in.

The story (and photograph) of St. Paul's survival that night is well known. Indeed, Rudi Giuliani, former Mayor of New York, referred to it more than once as he sought to restore the morale of his fellow citizens after the ghastly events of September 11th 2001. He even came to the Cathedral to express his admiration for all those who, in the aftermath of December 29th 1940, "picked themselves up, dusted themselves down, and started all over again."

All that's well enough known. But who knows how Wesley's Chapel fared on that very same winter night 75 years ago? They had just as torrid a time, if the truth were told, and responded with as much heroism and defiance as our friends down the road.

Just imagine the scene. In those days, John Wesley's House was flanked by a factory that ran from City Road along the whole length of our site till it reached Tabernacle Street. That was to the south of us. To our north, adjacent to the Manse, there was a jeweller's shop. All around us, higgledy piggledy, a jumble of tightly packed buildings. The cellars beneath the Manse (as well as those under John Wesley's House) served as bomb shelters for people living in our immediate vicinity. They were much used that night and those living on the site gave a vivid eye-witness account of what happened through a night "when we saw our dear old Chapel and Wesley's House surrounded by angry flames and in danger of complete destruction."

A couple of incendiary bombs fell within the Chapel grounds. These "exploded into dozens of smaller pieces and the yard seemed full of dancing squibs like some firework display." With sand and water these were finally put out but the evening was by no means over. The whole sky was alight, "the very heavens seemed to be on fire," and then came the fateful realisation that the factory next door had caught a direct hit and was on fire. By the time the firemen had been alerted, flames were running amok through the roof of the whole building. The fears of those living here were palpable:

Anxiously we watched those malignant tongues of flame as they belched from the windows [of the factory], darting out and licking the side of Wesley's House around the Prayer Room window, then spreading in the opposite direction into the buildings which converge on to the Graveyard. The flames there, at times, reached over Jabez Bunting's tomb on to the Chapel wall."

A team of firefighters, some of the 20,000 called out that night, responded to the call for help and provide a delicious, quintessentially English moment, in the very midst



of all the horrors of that night. This is how Mrs Hutchings, one of those living on our site at the time, described it:

“Is this a Church?” asked one of the firemen. “Wesley’s Chapel,” was the reply. “Then we must save it.” How heroically they worked. “Would they like a cup of tea?” we asked. Would they, indeed, after hours of strenuous work at other City fires? Rather. So Miss Willis and I kept the pot boiling while the two girls, heedless of the raid still in progress, went to and fro among the men with the welcome cups of tea.

Then the wind changed direction and the threat from the south diminished. The firemen soon had the blaze under control, often fighting it from positions established among the tombstones in the graveyard behind the Chapel. The inhabitants, their number reinforced by people taking shelter with them after enduring other infernos elsewhere in the neighbourhood, now began to settle down for the night in the cellars beneath the Manse. But not for long. Another urgent situation arose. The Benson buildings (the present Leysian Centre) and the Manse itself were in imminent danger of being burned down. The jeweller’s shop to the north of us was in full flame and also “a big factory opposite.” The little bedraggled band hastened across the courtyard to John Wesley’s House. Hours earlier it had been threatened. Now it represented the only safe place to take refuge.

Buildings crashed to the ground. Smoke and debris were everywhere. Somehow, the Chapel and its buildings survived while all around it went up in flames. The “all clear” sounded and people began to make for home through the blackened streets. Those who remained, “with smoke-filled eyes but grateful hearts,” faced the dawn of a new day with a lot of hard work to do. The lead in one of our stained glass windows had melted; part of the top floor of the Benson Building had been damaged, there were cracks in some of the other windows, there was mess everywhere. But, compared with the total mayhem and destruction to be seen around our site *in every direction* the faithful band who survived that night could only think that God had somehow spared them and their beloved Chapel, a brand plucked from the burning, “for some mighty purpose of His own or for some glorious work to be accomplished there in the years that lie ahead.”

What a story! Rudi Giuliani declared how the survival of St. Paul’s Cathedral that December night in 1940 had inspired him as he faced the grisly aftermath of the events of September 11th. I trust that this account of the way the Mother Church of World Methodism remained unbroken and triumphant on that self-same night, will similarly inspire the friends of Wesley’s Chapel around the world. One thing is certain. We who’ve received the grace of God in such ample measure must never let it go for nothing.

We must rise above the enmity that causes one person to persecute another, one group to demonise another, one nation to go to war against another. We, of all people, must keep alive the spirit of reconciliation. We must remember in order to forget. We must live in the light of our Lord’s command: What does it amount to if we love only those who love us? Anybody can do that. On Remembrance Sunday, we who remember, do so in order to put the past behind us and live in the light of the gospel of Christ. That is our divine calling. We were spared specifically for the purpose of proclaiming this message to all subsequent generations. May his holy name be praised. Amen.