

Hymns: **132** “O God, our help in ages past”
 689 “Let us bring the gifts we offer”
 696 “For the healing of the nations”
 645 “Will your anchor hold in the storms of life”

Readings: **Isaiah 25:1-9**
 Matthew 5:43-48

“UGH!!”

Margaret’s computer gave up the ghost this week. It is no more. May it rest in peace. It certainly rests in pieces.

So, generous person that I am, I offered her some time on my machine. That gave me a little spare time and I found myself watching some TV – a BBC documentary on the contribution of black actors to our film industry. As I turned the television on, the screen filled at once with a scene from “Twelve years a slave” – a scene that I remember well.

A dozen or so slaves are working under the midday sun, gathering cotton, on a plantation in the deep south of the USA. They’re working under the whip. The camera focusses on the pinched face of the master as he barks out his instructions – harder, faster, faster, harder. He surrounds these instructions with threats. “If you slack, you’ll get this,” he declares as he brandishes his whip. “I shan’t hesitate, it’s all in the Bible, I’ll be fulfilling God’s own word. So get on with it.” And he cracks the whip to emphasise his message.

Ugh! (in Welsh) Ychafi! Horrid!

The Bible is being used to justify barbarianism, torture, cruelty, man’s inhumanity to man, the whipping of slaves. Can it be true? Is it possible? Does the Bible really have stuff like that in it?

Well, yes, it does. And we heard our reading from Isaiah 25 paint just such a picture earlier in the service. It’s a truly perplexing passage of holy writ.

There are children in church this morning and I wondered whether to change the reading rather than wound their innocence with such words. But it’s Remembrance Sunday and we are thinking of those sad days when so many of the young people of yesteryear were snatched from us, brutally slaughtered, at home and abroad. And our young people see the news on television or their social networks and, I’m certain, are quite familiar with the terrible things that are happening in our world today. So I decided to stick with those gruesome verses in Isaiah 25.

They paint a picture of death and destruction – cities turned to heaps of ruin, fortified towns reduced to rubble, homes swept away never to be rebuilt. They describe a huge victory won at enormous cost.

As I read these odious verses, my mind was filled with pictures of Aleppo and Mosul and Homs whose inhabitants are being afflicted by outcomes just like the biblical ones. In our own day, we have vivid pictures to accompany the biblical text. Here are cities reduced to rubble. We see corpses hung limply from lampposts. Everything seems surrounded by heaps of ruined buildings. Human shields are being used to protect the fighters. The air is stinking, sulphurous, hanging heavily. And we must imagine hundreds of thousands of cowering, fearful, starving people.

Where has my description wandered to? In the Old testament lesson, it's God who seems to have done these dreadful things. Not spontaneously either. They've been long-planned, certain and sure. And the writer declares his readiness to praise and exalt Almighty God for the wreckage that he's consigned upon people.

When God is marched onto the battlefield to justify our atrocities, we should beware.

The scriptural picture goes on to describe a peace that emerges from the chaos. It's so total that we can scarcely imagine all the suffering that preceded it. Now there's talk of fine dining with well-matured wines and sumptuous banquets consumed in luxurious and well-appointed homes. All this on the back of the wanton destruction and loss of life with which the chapter begins.

I wonder whether peace in Afghanistan or Syria or Iraq or Palestine or Israel (if it ever comes) will be on the back of similar levels of suffering, needless death, ruined cities?

So we should congratulate God! We should raise a glass and honour his name. By proving himself stronger than any other god, he's brought us into an era of peace and prosperity. Good on you God!

It's right and proper for us to think these thoughts on Remembrance Sunday, one hundred years after the battle of the Somme, 75 years after Pearl Harbour, one year after Bataclan in Paris, and at the same time as the citizens of Mosul and Aleppo are undergoing such intense bombardment and suffering.

We must remember these things. It's the clarity with which we remember them that represents the only hope we have of working for a world where such things never happen again. Remembrance Sunday must never become a mere matter of nostalgia. It's not about looking wistfully over our shoulder into a fast receding past. Nor of conjuring up domestic pictures and localised events. We must remember the breadth of the conflicts that have consumed whole generations of our people. We must smell and feel and imagine the horrors which preceding generations underwent. Memory must become active and engaged, a radicalising element; that stirs us into a determination to do whatever we can to bring peace to our troubled world.

The price of freedom is eternal vigilance. Remembering is the trigger that maintains our levels of vigilance.

And for God's sake we must keep God out of it! When it's a matter of war, we're on our own. It's our choice. Our play. We must make the best of it. Keep God out of the picture.

We're going to need God when it's all over. If we reduce him to the ranks, if we line him up with our side in a dispute, or even share him out among disputants (as in Northern Ireland or the United States Civil War, then we'll have lost his power to heal and reconcile, to win hearts and minds, to bring us back to our senses.

God is not up for sale. He's not a conscript in the armies of our choice.

So we have to read the scriptures honestly, even the tough bits, the unacceptable bits, we must be prepared to attach a health warning to those bits that are positively dangerous.

We can't airbrush the tough bits out of the material we study. We can't cry "lock 'em up, lock 'em up". We can't build a wall around the nasty things we don't want to hear in order to keep undesirable thoughts away from our sight and our attention. We mustn't dismiss the hard things we have to struggle with by caricaturing them, turning them into simplified and deceitful images. We mustn't complain about a rigged lectionary, or accuse the commentaries of telling the story their way. There's a need for openness, a readiness to engage in real debate. We mustn't let things become a trompe l'oeil, a matter of self-delusion. We mustn't indulge in lies or deception, bullying or bullshit.

All that may a President make but it won't build a house on a firm foundation.

Fortunately, the idea of God I've been describing, the one that springs from those early verses in Isaiah 25, is developed radically as the biblical action proceeds and time passes.

The primitive and dangerous God, the one who favours his own tribe at the expense of all others, is developed in the course of Israel's history to become a much more rounded and universal figure. A hundred and fifty years after Isaiah 25, during the Babylonian captivity, a new and much more accessible understanding of God emerged – one who would restore his people to their promised land not as the fulfilment of a goal but in order to charge them with the responsibility of being a light to lighten the gentiles and to be agents for building a peaceful world.

And things become even more radical in the New Testament. Jesus taught that it is far better for people to pray for our enemies than to work for their destruction. Hate when it begets further hate simply creates a whirlpool of destructive and negative energy.

In the Sunday School room of the church where I began my association with Christianity, there was a plaque hanging on the wall. It bore the names of those from our little Chapel (there were never more than 30 members) who fought in the First World War. I saw it constantly in my youth but didn't really note its contents. When I

was there a few weeks ago, I took particular notice. A young man named Bert Owen, a private in the Welsh Regiment, had given his life for his country. He died in Flanders in June 1917 at the age of 23. He'd been with the Welsh Brigade in their attack on Mametz Wood, one of the most calamitous skirmishes during the battle of the Somme. 4000 Welsh soldiers died in that place. Bert Owen somehow survived. But only for a few more months.

I end with the story of this simple Welsh boy because, in a sense, his unremarkable life contains all the energies that we should be capturing on Remembrance Sunday. We should not be drawn into an understanding of war that makes it glorious, or a victory that suggests it to be final and conclusive. Peace needs to be built and to go on being built all the time. The victims of war, people like Bert Owen, scream out at us across the decades urging us not to consign them to oblivion. They must be remembered. And we must plead with God to find a way to heal the wounds of the whole of humanity. For Bert Owen didn't die just for Wales, or for Britain, or for the Allies. He died for a better world. And that must be our struggle now.

Amen