

Revelation 21.1–7

Peace that Lasts

Amington

Sunday 11 November 2018

The war to end war?

Well, the day is finally here – for months now we have been building up to the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day, the day the Great War ended. In 1918 the end of what was called ‘the war to end war’ was celebrated with peace parties up and down the land. School children – including in Amington – were given an extra day off school to celebrate... and I suspect for their teachers’ sore heads to recover after the parties...

The phrase ‘war to end war’ was made popular by HG Wells – and on one level you can see why. It is estimated that the number of soldiers on both sides was over 65 million. Up to 10 million of them lost their lives – and a further 20 million were wounded.¹ New technologies – aeroplanes, submarines and tanks – were used for the first time. But instead of shortening the war, they made it bloodier than any conflict in history.

Until the Second World War. This time, between 21 and 25 million soldiers were killed – but the total death toll was in excess of 50 million people – not including Jews killed in the Holocaust.²

The ‘war to end war’ did nothing of the sort – but ushered in a new century of killing, unlike anything humanity had known before. The only year since 1945 that a member of the British Armed Forces *hasn’t* died is 1968. It is impossible to know for sure, but it has been estimated that during the 20th century something like 187 million people died as a result of war.³ There are something like 60 armed conflicts being fought around the world, *today*.⁴

Statistics such as these are beyond horrifying. Obviously, and rightly so, the focus of Remembrance Day this year is the centenary of the end of the First World War; 100 years since Armistice Day.

In my school services this week I’ve been asking the children if any of them know what an ‘armistice’ is. For those of you who don’t know – it isn’t actually a peace treaty, it’s simply a cease-fire, a truce between warring nations. Both sides call a halt to the killing – it is a *temporary peace*.

Though Armistice Day was the end of the Great War, it certainly was not the end of *war*; the guns started firing again far too soon.

Peace

Long ago a man sought the perfect picture of peace. Not finding one that satisfied, he announced a contest to produce this masterpiece. The challenge stirred the imagination of artists everywhere, and paintings arrived from far and wide. Finally the great day of revelation arrived. The judges uncovered one peaceful scene after another, while the viewers clapped and cheered. The tensions grew. Only two pictures remained veiled. As a judge pulled the cover from one, a hush fell over the crowd. A mirror-smooth lake reflected lacy, green birches under the soft blush of the evening sky. Along the grassy shore, a flock of sheep grazed undisturbed. Surely this was the winner.

The man with the vision uncovered the second painting himself, and the crowd gasped in surprise. Could this be peace? A tumultuous waterfall cascaded down a rocky precipice; the crowd could almost feel its cold, penetrating spray. Stormy-grey clouds threatened to explode with lightning, wind and rain. In the midst of the thundering noises and bitter chill, a spindly tree clung to the rocks at the edge of the falls. One of its branches reached out in front of the torrential waters as if foolishly seeking to experience its full power.

A little bird had built a nest in the elbow of that branch. Content and undisturbed in her stormy surroundings, she rested on her eggs. With her eyes closed and her wings ready to cover her little ones, she manifested peace that transcends all earthly turmoil.

A Wardrobe from the King, Berit Kjos, pp. 45-46⁵

There are two kinds of peace.

The first is the peace we heard about in our Bible reading: it is the perfect, final peace, in which God **dwells with** his people (3). Note that we aren't taken away to heaven – rather, heaven comes to us, the new Jerusalem comes **down out of heaven** for us to live in (2).

And then we read those beautiful and famous words:

‘“God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’

Revelation 21.4 (NIV)

This is the *final* ‘Armistice Day’, the final cease-fire, the final truce that brings lasting peace. This is the peace for which we long, the peace which makes the first Armistice Day – no matter how important it was – simply a shadow of what is to come.

One day – one day, God promises we will know that peace. But until then there will still be wars, and we will still need to stand in silence and remember and give thanks for those who have given their lives for our freedom.

But there is a second kind of peace – and *this* kind of peace we *can* know here and now. This is the peace of the little bird, nesting safely in her branch with the storm clouds above her, the raging torrent of the waterfall beside her, the air full of chill and menace.

If you're a normal human being, your life probably resembles that picture of a furious waterfall and stormy skies, far more often than it resembles those pictures of smooth lakes and rolling green hills, blue skies and herds of tranquil sheep.

If you're a normal human being, your life could probably be better described by words like 'stress', 'busy' and 'hectic', than 'peaceful'.

One of the most precious promises in the Bible is that when we pray and give thanks to God **in every situation**, he will grant to us **peace which transcends all understanding** (Philippians 4.6).

In other words, God promises that when we pray and give thanks to him, he will give us peace *that doesn't make sense* – peace that we have no right to feel, because of the raging storms all around us.

Prayer

Why? How can praying do this?

Because prayer is *so much more* than a shopping list of things we want, and people we want to bless.

Prayer connects us to God, to something, to *someone* bigger than us, bigger even than the storms that rage around us.

Prayer lifts our eyes out of the mire and the mess, and helps us to see God.

Prayer is an act of worship, because it recognises that *we* are creatures and *he* is God – it puts us in our place, but that's a good thing, because it put things – us – in the *proper* place.

Prayer is as important to human beings as breathing – without it we suffocate.

I was listening to a podcast this week, and the person said that faith isn't about what you believe, it's about *who you know*.

And that means prayer is a conversation – not with a philosophy essay or a doctrinal statement – but with a *person*. That person loves you, that person died for you, that person lives for you – and that person's name is Jesus.

Like the millions of servicemen and women who have given their lives for others, so Jesus gave his life – not in an armed conflict, not for a temporary armistice – but for peace that lasts.

It is because of what *he* did, not on a battlefield, but on a Roman cross, and then leaving his tomb empty, that we know he has conquered death itself – and because of *that* we can know peace:

- the final and lasting peace when heaven comes to earth,
- and peace today amid the raging storms of life.

So friends, let us commemorate the first Armistice Day, which brought a temporary peace, and honour the memory of those who died for it.

But let us also give thanks for Jesus, because *his* Armistice Day brings peace that lasts, and let us be people of prayer, who know and trust in God's peace, the peace which doesn't make sense, the peace of Jesus Christ.

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special_report/1998/10/98/world_war_i/198172.stm.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_casualties#Total_deaths.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2002/feb/23/artsandhumanities.highereducation>.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ongoing_armed_conflicts.

⁵ <http://saltforsermons.org.uk/the-perfect-picture-of-peace/>.