



## Opening Prayer for Remembrance Sunday

Let us pray:

Welcoming God,  
in Jesus Christ, you showed up in our world,  
and showed us what it means to be fully and truly alive;  
as we use the gift of technology to gather together,  
to worship and to remember,  
open our hearts and prepare our minds to meet with you,  
and to be changed by the love we find.  
We ask this in Jesus' name.

**Amen**

## 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

What does 'remembrance' mean to you? What sorts of things spring to mind when you hear the word?

## Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of hope,  
you made human beings to reflect your life and light.  
Even when we prefer to hide in the darkness,  
you seek us out, and call us to turn around and return to you.  
We praise you because we're fearfully and wonderfully made  
and because we're never beyond the reach of your love.

Thank you for sending your Son to show us how to live,  
and through his cross and resurrection, opening up the Way  
of peace, of reconciliation, of flourishing and life.

In Jesus' name, and in the power of the Holy Spirit,  
we bring to you our thanks and praises.

**Amen**

## Prayers of Renewal

Let us pray:

God of peace, forgive us  
for taking part in that which turns people against each other,  
for times when we've fuelled anger and sought revenge,  
for not heeding your call to love one another.

**Forgive us and help us.**

God of healing, restore us  
when we're wounded by the words and actions of others,  
when we feel overwhelmed by sadness, anger or grief,  
when remembering is just too painful.

**Restore us and help us.**

God of life, inspire us  
to trust in the hope that your love brings,  
to have the courage to see past war and violence,  
to seek to mend fractured relationships.

**Inspire us and help us.**

God of new beginnings,  
forgive us, restore us and inspire us,  
that we might be channels of your peace, justice and mercy,  
and make a difference in our world.  
In Jesus' name, we pray.

**Amen**

## **Act of Remembrance** (including two minutes' silence)

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old.  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
we will remember them.

**We will remember them.**

**Reading**     Matthew 25:1 – 13

## **Sermon**

Saturday 11th November, at 11am, marked precisely one-hundred-and-five years since the signing of the Armistice and thus the ending of the First World War. That conflict, catalysed by the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand but with its roots in rivalry among imperial powers and a thirst after war within many European states, claimed millions of lives and scared a whole generation. Yet, for all of the tremendous suffering on each side, it is widely accepted that its unsatisfactory outcome and the highly punitive conditions of the Treaty of Versailles sowed the seeds which led to the rise of the Nazis and to the Second World War. It serves as a powerful warning and points us to the difficult truth that real peace requires more than just the laying down of arms. Antisemitism was a significant problem not just in Germany in the decades leading up to the Holocaust, but in several countries including the United Kingdom, as seen not least in open hostility in the popular press to Jewish refugees being given sanctuary here in the 1930s. Scapegoating and dehumanisation are the antithesis of real peace, but it is arguable that many were willing to turn a blind eye to this in face of Germany's apparent resurgence, and because they shared their prejudices.

Working for peace is not easy. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the handling of the establishment of the state of Israel in lands

then occupied by the Palestinians was always going to cause some tensions, but recent horrific events highlight a yawning gap between aspirations for a just two-state settlement and the violent reality. The energy that has been put into seeking a resolution is substantial but in that conflict, and many others across the world, real peace seems a long way off. As we reflect on this, it may seem somewhat unusual for the Parable of the Oil Lamps to be our reading for Remembrance Sunday. Yet, I ask you to trust me, because although the set Gospel passage may seem an unlikely choice, it offers at least three helpful jumping-off points which might aid us in thinking through what being a people who work for peace at the present time looks like.

It was not unusual, in the Middle East of that time, for a wedding to unfold in the way described in this parable. Those rituals associated with getting married in that context were quite different to what we're generally used to in the UK in 2023. For starters, the betrothal lasted exactly a year and was the point at which the marriage contract was formed. The bride, who could have been as young as twelve, would continue to live in her father's home for that year. When the wedding day came round, there would a joyful procession from her house to the groom's home, where the wedding feast would be held. It wasn't unusual for this to happen late on in the day, and the way would be lit for the couple by female friends of the groom (not the bride!) using oil lamps. Those young women entrusted with this task did not know in advance when the groom would be ready, as there was frequently some last-minute stuff to be worked out between him and the bride's father, in what was a deeply patriarchal society. Hence, while all this may be rather different to what we are used to, the parable's original hearers would have clearly understood what was going on.

So, how does this help in exploring Remembrance? Well, firstly, this is a parable about being prepared. Despite Jesus's injunction within the final verse to keep awake (Matthew 25:13), all of the women fall asleep while they wait, but that isn't the point. What separates them

is that some were prepared, while the rest were caught off-guard. It begs the question in our context: what does it mean to be ready, to be prepared to seek peace? Despite World War One being branded the 'war to end all wars', there's barely been a day in these past 105 years without a war raging somewhere across the world. Moreover, the acrimony and polarisation which characterises much of Western culture has manifested itself in the rise of populist movements; their continued scapegoating and dehumanisation of minorities suggests we are yet genuinely to learn the lessons of history.

Being prepared to work for peace against this backdrop is obviously not going to be easy, or without personal costs. Yet, as Christ came to reconcile the whole creation to God, so the Church is called to be an agent of reconciliation, in our broken and fractured world, so that authentic peace might flourish. Peace is about much more than the absence of conflict. It is about the building of bridges across divides, about the hard, painstaking, and non-linear work of truth-telling that allows the costs of conflicts to be seen, heard and owned, and about creating the conditions which allow all people to flourish. A first step, drawing on the wisdom of Desmond Tutu in his work in South Africa, is the internal one of learning to see others how God sees them. All people matter to God, because all people are made in the image of God. You and I matter infinitely to the One who loved us enough to die for us, but if that's true for you, and for me, it's also true for each and every other person too, even and perhaps especially those that we fear or instinctively dislike. Taking the second step of putting the consequences of this into practice is not a pathway to popularity, as it inevitably highlights tensions and division. Being prepared to work for peace and be peacemakers means being ready to tell unpopular truths about the value of all people, not just those like us.

Secondly, while biblical scholars continue to debate about what the oil might symbolise in this story, what seems to me to be clear is the need to be people who bring light in the darkness. Israel were called

by God to be a light to nations, so that through them, others may be blessed. The Church shares this calling, and it might mean a myriad of things. For example, it could mean getting involved with Amnesty International or other organisations which campaign against human rights abuses. It could mean challenging politicians about why many veterans end up being homeless and without the support, especially in terms of mental health, they need after leaving the forces. It could mean working with others to challenge the poisonous rhetoric which surrounds any discussion about asylum and supporting refugees in this country. Again, this isn't easy, but it is all about light in the dark.

Finally, there is a profound note of hope in today's parable, as at its heart lies a banquet celebrating the coming of God's Kingdom in all of its fullness. Elsewhere in the Bible, we learn that, when God does renew the heavens and the earth, there will be no more pain, or war, or suffering, or tears. Even when faced with the realities of this hope seeming far off right now, are we nonetheless able to hold the vision in front of us, and think, pray, and act on the knowledge that another way not only is possible, but is promised to all of creation in Christ? In other words, can we embody that hope in all we are and do, even when the going gets tough? When I've had privilege of leading civic Remembrance services, one of the prayers we've used has spoken, very movingly, of the need to ensure the sacrifices made in the past conflicts we remember at this time have not been in vein, by working for peace. Some of you will be thinking about people you know, who have made huge sacrifices, maybe even giving their lives, in serving their country. May we commit ourselves today to working for peace, so that love might truly be the way of the world we share. Amen

### **Space for Quiet Reflection**

*During this time, you are invited to consider ways in which you might work for peace in your own situation, whether in daily relationships, or on a larger scale as suggested above.*

## Prayers of Intercession

In this time of remembrance and reflection,  
we hold before you those serving in our armed forces,  
those working to care for the wounded and suffering,  
the families separated from loved ones stationed abroad,  
and those who have died serving their countries.  
Help us to honour the sacrifices made by working for peace,  
and being true people of hope.

In a world blighted by wars and intractable conflicts,  
God of peace, **may your will be done.**

Where fragile ceasefires struggle to contain violent impulses,  
God of peace, **may your will be done.**

When people are forced to abandon their homes and flee,  
God of peace, **may your will be done.**

For those bearing the physical and emotional scars of war,  
God of peace, **may we be bearers of hope.**

For veterans who find themselves living on the streets,  
God of peace, **may we be bearers of hope.**

For asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced folk,  
God of peace, **may we be bearers of hope.**

In a time of silence, we bring those people and situations  
particularly on our hearts and in our memories today to you...

## Lord's Prayer

## Blessing