

**SERMON BY THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN**

**REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY**

**SUNDAY NOVEMBER 12 2023**



**ST. MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER**

**20 Great Peter Street**

**London SW1P 2BU**

November 12 2023

After the turbulence and the tension of Saturday's demonstrations today we have the dignity, the ceremony and the 2 minutes silence of Remembrance Sunday.

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The contrasts, even with some negative glitches in small parts of the crowds yesterday, both reflect strengths in our nation.

Remembrance Sunday is always a special and sacred Sunday in our hearts and memories.

But this year these emotions are particularly poignant. Because wars are raging on our television screens and on the ground where the realities of horrific suffering in Ukraine, Israel and Gaza are so devastating.

So, this morning lets tackle two questions – one personal, one theological.

First, what do we, or should we, remember on Remembrance Sunday?

Secondly, what is the relevance of God in Remembrance Sunday?

In particular, where is God in the suffering of war and its consequences?

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Remembrance is deeply personal.

Not many of us in this church today can personally recall the last time our nation and its civilian population came face to face with the horrors of war.

My late wife, Elizabeth, often described with much emotion even towards the end of her eighty-six-year life, a moment in her childhood when she looked out of her bedroom window in Cardiff and watched the nearby docks exploding in flames under a Luftwaffe bombing raid in 1943. She was with her grandmother, the Lord Mayor of Cardiff, and Elizabeth said her

November 12 2023

grandmother's explosive emotions of seeing the life blood of her city under bombardment, were almost as explosive as the bombs themselves!

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My own earliest memory came when, as a toddler in the Summer of 1945, I was playing in the sandpit of my Great Uncle's home in Hurlingham Road, Putney.

Suddenly in the sky above came the ominous phut-phut-phut sound of a V1 flying bomb or Doodlebug approaching overhead.

The sound meant nothing to me of course. I went on making sandcastles.

But when the phut-phut-phut sound of the flying bomb's engine cut out, my Great Aunt panicked, and she tried to yank me out of the sandpit with hysterical urgency.

But even as a three-year old I had a will of my own so I resisted her.

To this day I can vividly recall our struggle.

I, of course, lost it, but not before I had been forcibly hauled out of the sandpit and dragged along the garden path scraping my knees while my Aunt repeatedly kept screaming the mysterious word "Doodlebug! Doodlebug!"

Later on, it became a family joke that Little Jonathan could say the word "Doobug" before he could say Mama, Dada or Auntie.

But the V1 bomb itself was no joke. It landed on a house one street away in Foskett Road killing the family inside.

And to this day I can remember the explosion, the flames, and the clanging of bells from the Green Goddess fire engines that roared along the Hurlingham Road to the scene of the disaster.

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November 12 2023

A deeper and more long-lasting personal memory of World War II involved my father, Bill Aitken.

He was a Canadian businessman, who in 1938 read in his local Toronto newspaper that "The Mother Country" – as England was often described in Canada, was on the brink of war,

and quite likely to lose the war because of the shortage of pilots.

Now my father was a well-qualified pilot. He was the reconnaissance pilot of a Territorial Army Regiment known as The Toronto Scottish Highlanders, most famous for parading in their kilts.

My mother in later years, used to tease my father by asking him "who on earth did you think The Toronto Scottish Highlanders were defending Canada against?"

But a pilot is a pilot, so my patriotic father wrote off to the Air Ministry in London volunteering to serve in the RAF.

The RAF wrote back saying come on over and see us.

So, paying his own way on a transatlantic ship in the Summer of 1938, year before the war broke out, my father did report to the Air Ministry in Whitehall who were impressed by his pilot licence and qualifications.

But then a Wing Commander asked him:

"How old are you Aitken?"

"Thirty-six, Sir" replied my father

"Have you brought your birth certificate?"

"Yes, Sir"

"Burn it at once!" ordered the Wing Commander pointing at a fire.

November 12 2023

The explanation for this bizarre instruction was that the age limit at which pilots could be recruited for the RAF was thirty.

But, once his birth certificate had gone up in flames, a blind eye could be turned to my father being over the age limit.

So, he signed on then and there.

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My father had what was in those days called a "good war" as a Spitfire pilot in the Battle of Britain and in many other aerial battles.

Until in 1942 he was shot down in a dogfight over the North Sea.

He just got his damaged Spitfire back to the Suffolk coast before it caught fire and he had to make a crash landing.

He was badly injured and burned.

At the time when I was born my mother did not think he would survive his injuries. But survive he did.

After over 120 plastic surgery operations on his burns as one of the early "guinea pigs" of the legendary plastic surgeon Archie McIndoe in East Grinstead hospital, he came back to more or less normal existence.

Although he was disfigured and walked with a stick in some pain for the rest of his life.

He died prematurely, partly because of his wartime injuries, at the early age of fifty-six when I was twenty-one.

I have wonderful memories of him as a good man and a good father, and I always think of him on Remembrance Sunday.

And today, encouraged by the words from our reading from Thessalonians, I look forward, and I quote, "to being caught up in the clouds and meeting him again with the Lord in the air".

November 12 2023

Now why am I telling you all this?

Not I hope because of some emotional self-indulgence or paternal hero worship on my part.

What I'm trying to illustrate is that Remembrance is a personal, natural and Godly emotion.

It stretches all the way back to the fifth commandment – honour thy father and thy mother.

And, also on this day of Remembrance Sunday, to honour an unseen host of those who made sacrifices, sometimes the supreme sacrifice in the service of their country and their God.

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The Second World War is rightly called a Just War. But that term is thrown about too easily by academic theologians and others.

It is made more complicated these days by factors such as "the laws of war" and the call for "a proportionate response" – phrases which are much used today in the context of Gaza.

So where is God in the horrors of war?

Whose prayers do we hope he is hearing and answering?

The prayers of Palestinian Christians under bombardment in Gaza?

The prayers of devout Conservative Jews in Israel who strongly support Mr Netanyahu's war plans?

The prayers of Ukraine's battered believers, now hunkering down for another cold winter of torment in what is becoming a gruesome and long war of attrition?

Or those of the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church who passionately supports and blesses Mr Putin's invasion of Ukraine?

November 12 2023

Reading the mind of God in such conflicts is a complicated endeavour.

But a good clue might be the moment related in John's Gospel when Jesus is alone with Pontius Pilate on the eve of the crucifixion.

And in John Chapter 18 verse 36 Jesus says to him:

"If my Kingdom were from this world my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over..... But as it is my Kingdom is not from here".

So, if the use of force is not Christ's way, neither in an ideal world should it be the way of his followers.

Yet as Augustine and others have argued, force can be justified in self-defence, hence the doctrine of the Just War.

But with the horrors of Gaza in mind, we might be entitled to ask if in such scenarios: would God want to see some limits on the degree of force used?

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As we all know God gave individuals and nations free will.

Yet the way free will is sometimes used in war must surely upset God and make him suffer.

But does God suffer?

Strange though it may sound for nineteen of the last twenty-one centuries, the received and almost unanimous wisdom of theologians, and church leaders was "No, God does not suffer".

From the Patristic fathers onwards, it was an axiom of Christian teaching that even though Jesus clearly endured personal suffering on the Cross, God himself was impassible, emotionally unchangeable and therefore could not suffer.

November 12 2023

However, in the 20th century, after two world wars, the holocaust and later horrors, there was a revolution in Christian thought.

This revolution was a minor miracle as well, since most 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century theologians, not always the humblest of people began to admit that they and their predecessors had got it wrong.

Today God, in a time of war, is no longer seen as a remote and lofty figure, looking down on earthly conflicts as if he were an unchanging, unemotional, impassible statue far removed and far detached from human sufferings below.

Thanks to the writings of Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jurgen Moltmann and others, the theologians who previously presented this view of an impassible God incapable of suffering have now seen a great light.

Today the consensus of scholars and church leaders is that God suffers with us.

And this consensus goes a long way towards answering one of the most difficult question of our Christian Faith: "Why does God allow suffering?"

Yes, he allows it because he allows free will.

But once we understand that he suffers with us, then we are able to pray and connect with a God who shares in our pain and agony, particularly at time of war.

That is why, again and again, in the midst of wartime trauma, believers seek to connect the horrors experienced by themselves, their family members and others with the love of God.

Here then we stand at the intersecting cross-roads between remembrance, prayer silence and the love of a God who suffers with us.

As we ponder and pray at this cross-roads may we deepen our Godly understanding of Remembrance Sunday.

**Amen**