

St Brandon's, Sermon for 12th November 2017

1 Thessalonians 4.13-18; (Matthew 25.1-13)

War Poetry reading: Christ in Flanders, from The Spectator, 11 September 1915; (& Reconciliation, Siegfried Sassoon)

Just People

Alison Hobbs

I have one umbrella question to pose for the sermon today, and that is “Are we just people?”

Paul in today's New Testament reading, would probably say “No, we are not 'just people', we are people of faith, and that makes us something more, doesn't it?”

Paul was writing to the Thessalonians, a new church, to remind them of the promise Jesus made that he would return to take them with him.

It was now a generation or more since Jesus' death and some people were getting anxious about those who had died already, while waiting. Paul's rallying cry is designed to bring them back to a strong sense of identity as the people of Christ - Jesus' followers - waiting with a particular hope:

the hope of the coming of the Lord.

Paul's graphic description of how those who are alive when the Lord comes will be caught up in the air has led to a lot of strange expectations. This is poetic language - artistic license - not the instruction manual, and needs to inspire but cannot inform as to mechanics or detail!

It is to encourage and inspire us towards the truth at the heart of the matter: that Jesus promised – foretold - many things, some of which have come about, some of which are coming about, and yet to happen. That is why we say we are living as the church in 'between times' – Jesus has, is and is yet to come.

Are we just people? Fortunately, no, we are more than that because we are church.

As individuals, we can be – are - overwhelmed by the insignificance of ourselves in the face of the scale of troubles in the world. The horrors of wars present and past are beyond us in every sense as individuals.

We may have faith, and strong faith can achieve extraordinary results – faith as strong and hard and brilliant as a diamond, that can achieve much, but most of us are not blessed with that strength and are unlikely to acquire it.

But as church we are interconnected and inter-dependent people: think reinforced concrete: a whole mesh of support running through each of us, when we hang in there.

There will be some here today who may only come on occasions, nonetheless, they are identifying and knowing the need to be present as church, to identify as church people to own together the corporate grief we share at the pain and carnage, the losses of warfare, the longing for peace in our world.

This is the place and we are the people who meet here with God to appeal to him for a change to come about in us and in our world, to move us towards that vision of His peace and His kingdom here on earth.

We *can* only do that as church, if we come together and recognise the need for each other and for God to lead us, and to make ourselves more ready to be guided by Him.

Martin and Alan reminded us though, with the poem '*Christ in Flanders*', of the way we so easily fail if we are not on our guard.

In times of relative comfort and prosperity it is easy to delude ourselves that we have only a *little* need for God, at our convenience once the pleasures and demands of our personal lives and work loads have been attended to.

Here we are drawn backwards into being 'just **people**' excusing it as harmless and essential that we live as 'normal people' 'normally do'. As the poem puts it:

'But we are very ordinary men - And there were already other things to think of - ... You walked among us, and we did not see - they didn't see whilst the times were adequately comfortable, but once removed to Flanders: -

The hideous warfare seems to make things clear ... We have no doubts, we know that You are here.'

Part of what we come together today to do is to remember the faith of many who suffered, who not only fought to bring peace but testified to the importance and reality of their faith when tested in the worst of places.

As church, the remembering must contain that element of witness, these were not 'just people' who suffered horribly and died, these were some of our most eloquent witnesses to Christ walking among us in all situations, in the mundane as well as the killing fields. They leave a great legacy of writings, now translated into films and the inspiration for novels: perhaps we could share some of those that have moved us?

The lesson from these witnesses needs to be, though, that Jesus was not, is not, evident only in the lives of our heroes, he is among us now.

The poet writing *Christ in Flanders* was primarily regretting his past blindness to Christ in the mundane:

'You walked among us, and we did not see. Your feet were bleeding as You walked our pavements - Can there be other folk as blind as we?'

Well, if Amos, the writer of today's Old Testament reading was in the room he would say "Yes! His people are blind like that!" Amos writes in anger against the comfortable, affluent society of his time. He is angry because they go through the religious observances celebrating festivals but fail to realise that their prosperity is built on foundations of exploitation.

They are not seeing properly what the ordinary around them is made up of: the comfortable life on the surface is not good enough beneath: they are not seeing the pain and suffering of those who are servicing their lifestyle.

Amos warns the day of reckoning is not going to look pretty for them if they carry on this way – why are they looking ahead to it with festival days instead of gloom?

He longs for justice to roll down like waters.

I picture a great woosh and flood of justice carrying everything along in its path, wouldn't that

be great?
And scary?
Could it be done peacefully?

Many of those who were swept along in the forces of the two world wars and died in service, died giving their lives in the hope that the world would become a better place: wanting to bring lasting justice and peace to our world.

How do we relate to that fight now?

How do we as people of faith, as church, honour the requirement to strive for justice, and honour the memory of those who gave their lives in the hope of it?

There was a concerted effort to improve the lives of 'ordinary people' in the wake of the last war as those who survived returned from service; provision for health, education and welfare for those unlucky enough to be without gainful employment.

Where do we stand as a church now?

'You walk among us; do we see your feet are bleeding as You walk our pavements?'

Christ showing us the pain and his presence in the ordinary, if we only try to see.

How far can we claim to be '**Just** people': a church of people who encourage each others' endeavours to live justly?

Do we see ourselves encouraging each other to see the injustices around us, and even to seek to address some?

Injustice is one of the roots of evil and war. Justice and righteousness are at the heart of the gospel, and we are warned frequently in scripture not to forget this.

The gospel reading about the ten bridesmaids with their lamps is again a warning against complacency.

We cannot afford to be complacent about our faith, about actively living it just because we are, here, in relatively prosperous and comfortable times.

As church people we are called to be lampholders but it is not sufficient to be holding the lamp if the light goes out.

If we do not attend to the oil in it.

We are back with pointers towards judgement day – the second coming – and how we will account for our response to Christ who trusts us to carry his light as his church until he comes again.

By being church, can we be *more* than just '*people*'?

By being church, can we be more **just** people?

We live in a hurting world that so many have sacrificed their lives to save, and none more so than Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen