

# **Brancepeth Sermon: War Memorial**

## **Remembrance Sunday**

### **Mike Higton**

Jonah 3.1-5,10; Psalm 62.5-12; Hebrews 9.24-28; Mark 1.14-20

*Please be seated.*

Imagine that it is November the 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918.

In the frozen dark this morning,

at around five o'clock,

in a railway carriage standing in a forest clearing

somewhere in Picardy in Northern France,

the German delegation and the representatives of the allies

signed an armistice,

declaring that their four-year war should come to an end

later this morning, at the eleventh hour.

In the five and a half hours since,  
nearly three thousand more men have died.

And they are still dying.

The guns won't even pause for breath  
before that eleventh hour arrives.

The last known military casualty of the war,  
an American named Henry Gunther,  
will be shot charging a German outpost at *10.59*.

And then, and only then, the guns will finally stop,  
the smoke will drift away  
over the fields and shattered woods of Belgium and Northern France;  
it will drift away over the trenches, the field hospitals,  
the command posts, the supply depots, and the cemeteries,  
and it will all be over.

Except, of course, that nothing will be over.

The wounded will carry on dying.

Sickness and starvation will continue looting  
the quietened battlefields.

Grief will keep its lodging with the families and friends  
of the nine million combatants and seven million civilians  
who have died.

And the long scars of war will stay  
scratched across the landscape.

The French government will identify a quarter of a million acres,  
the 'red zone', as land completely devastated,  
land on which human life has simply become impossible;  
land wholly sacrificed to the war.

And even today, after a long century of clean-up,  
there remain tens of thousands of these uninhabitable acres –  
land occupied by nothing but the ghosts of vanished villages,  
the blurred marks of trenches and shell-holes,  
ton upon ton of buried ordnance,  
and the still unrecovered bodies of thousands who fell.

If the slow labour of clearance carries on at its current pace,  
it will be another seven centuries  
before all that land is redeemed.

The guns stopped, and it was all over  
at the eleventh hour, on the eleventh day, in the eleventh month  
– and yet nothing was over.

The consequences of war refused to be signed away by a treaty.

Our Bible readings this morning  
may seem remote from all of this.

The first, for instance, is from the story of the  
hapless and reluctant prophet Jonah.

We heard how he was ordered by God  
to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh,  
to proclaim divine judgment upon it –  
judgment for the sins of its inhabitants.

Yet that judgment is averted when the Ninevites turn  
in desperate repentance from those sins.

If we had read on, we'd have found  
Jonah consumed by wrath and injured pride  
at this reversal in the Ninevites' fate –  
at their unexpected escape from doom.

He had been sent to proclaim God's judgment,

and God's judgment was what he demanded to see.

It stuck in his throat that the Ninevites should be saved from reaping what they had sown.

Because that is what 'judgment' often means in the Bible:

God's judgment visited upon people is not some supernatural lightning strike or eruption of fire, but simply the abandonment of people to the consequences of their own actions.

Our actions make our bed, and God's judgment is to leave us to lie in it.

Jonah's petulant frustration at the Ninevite's salvation is his disgust that they have escaped what he *knew* that they had deserved.

The Ninevites changed their ways, and were saved from the consequences of their actions.

The world that emerged from the Great War was not so fortunate.

We reaped – and we have gone on reaping –  
what had been sown.

We inherited a landscape of mud,  
a landscape soaked in poison,  
a landscape of unexploded shells.

We inherited a landscape of buried traumas,  
of acidic resentments,  
of long hatreds.

We inherited a wearying cycle of action and reaction.

We saw the allies throw back upon Germany  
the cost of all that Europe had been forced to bear,  
urgent like Jonah to see the enemy pay their due.

We saw Germany crushed by the weight of that anger,  
pressed down into the toxic mud of resentment and reaction.

We know now that the seeds of the next war  
were already being sown in that railway carriage  
in the forest in Picardy, at five o' clock this morning,  
and we know how virulently those seeds grew  
in all the ravaged soil along the Western front.

Poor Henry Gunther was not in fact  
the last casualty of the first world war;  
there were to be more, millions more in the decades to come  
– and if your historical lens is wide enough,  
and you trace the long lines of connection,  
you will know that they are dying still.

Injury begets injury,  
trauma begets trauma,  
sacrifice begets sacrifice –  
and so the sorry world rolls on.

It rolls on and on,  
from harm to harm and hatred to hatred,  
unless something interrupts it.

Unless something happens to break the cycle,  
to rescue us from the consequences of our actions.

Unless something happens to give us –  
not what we have all *earned*, but what we *need*.

And that is what our second reading pointed us to.  
Something different, it says, something unexpected,

something vibrant with the power to interrupt,  
happened in the life and death of Jesus.

The cycle of sin and sacrifice,  
the cycle of consequences,  
the cycle of injury and resentment –  
that cycle rolled over him and crushed him,  
but he refused to respond with violence of his own;  
he refused to respond with resentment.

He would not keep that cycle going.

His was therefore the sacrifice that can end all sacrifices,  
his life and death and resurrection  
God's way of interrupting the cyclical trauma of the world.

That is the heart of the Christian story.

We are not simply the sum of all that we have done,  
of all that has been done to us.

We are not simply that mud of past wrongs  
and remembered trauma.

We are not simply the playthings of long histories  
that we can do nothing to change.

We, all of us, are the objects of God's love –  
a love that begins again, a love that forgives,  
a love that makes a new start.

A love that does not measure itself out  
according to what we've earned,  
according to the consequences of all our actions.

The love embodied in Jesus.

To follow this Jesus –  
to join with Simon and Andrew and James and John  
from our Gospel reading –  
to follow this Jesus means throwing our lot in with him,  
with the love that he embodied,  
rather than with the cycle of violence.

It means recognising that if we were all left  
to the consequences of our actions,  
if we were all left to the after effects of our histories,  
what we have collectively earned by all that we have done,  
then we would all be lost.

There is simply too much blood-watered, poison-seeded soil,  
and it will go on yielding its iron harvest.

It means recognising that we need something else:  
we need *forgiveness*,  
we need a love that doesn't stop to tally up accounts,  
that doesn't measure itself out  
against a litany of remembered wrongs,  
a love that refuses to play the game of consequences.

We need to learn to recognise ourselves  
as the recipients of that reckless, uncalculating love,  
the recipients of God's love in Jesus,  
and we need in our turn to embody it –  
to learn to love with a love like Jesus.

The Armistice that we rightly celebrate today  
was a temporary interruption.

The shells stopped falling – but only for a time.

The men stopped marching into the field of enemy fire –  
but only for a time.

The bodies stopped dropping into the poisoned soil –  
but only for a time.

And darker plants than poppies  
were already growing in that soil.

We need, we desperately need –  
we needed then, and we still need today –  
a different harvest.

We need today, in memory of all those who died,  
all those who gave their lives,  
all those whose lives were taken from them  
and buried in this mud –  
we need today to grasp hold of the peace  
that we are offered in Christ,  
a peace beyond resentment,  
a peace beyond defensiveness,  
a peace beyond payback,  
a peace beyond what anyone, friend or enemy, *deserves*,  
a peace beyond consequences.

Let a commitment to a peace like that  
be our war memorial.

*Amen*