

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH 2 BEFORE ADVENT WEEK 33 YEAR B 14 NOVEMBER 2021
REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY.

What causes wars? We could come up with a few ideas. People wanting land or power. People wanting to spread a political ideology. People rising up against an oppressive regime. People responding to aggression, in self-defence or to protect the weak. From very early days Christians have asked the question, 'When is it right to go to war?'. It can of course be asked from a purely human point of view.

Remembrance Sunday brings warfare into our minds. It's also referred to in today's gospel, where Jesus says there will be 'wars and rumours of wars'. We read the first eight verses of the 13th chapter of Mark's gospel. The whole of the chapter is about the future, including the coming of the Son of man to gather his elect, and it's not easy to understand. It's not a timetable, though some groups have treated it like that. We need to think where it's coming from.

Here the book of Daniel helps. We're probably familiar with the stories of Daniel in the lion's den, and Daniel and his friends in the furnace. Next Sunday, the feast of Christ the King, we shall hear the passage which begins

I saw in the night visions, and behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a human being, and he came to the Ancient of Days.

Beyond these we may not know much from the book of Daniel.

Today's short Old Testament passage is from chapter 12. It speaks of God's people being delivered from a time of anguish, so there is a natural link with the theme of today's gospel. The connection is even closer because the previous chapter (11) is a list of wars by which successive Middle Eastern kings and empires rose and fell. The nation of Israel was ruled by one power after another. They wanted to be set free.

You may know that the people of Israel were taken into exile in the 6th century bc, but allowed back to their homeland after about 50 years. That's when the period of foreign domination began. Just as we ask the question, 'What causes wars?', they asked the questions, 'Why are we not free? Why, if we're God's chosen people, is he not looking after us?' One answer, often given by the prophets, was, 'Because of your sins.' Another answer came from a different direction. It was that the evils on earth were the reflection of struggles going on in the heavenly places: the cosmic battle between good and evil. Certain individuals were allowed to know what was going on in heaven. Daniel was

one such. Knowledge was given them through dreams (visions of the night) and/or by a visiting angel who was their guide and interpreter.

The angel Gabriel is Daniel's guide (he is named earlier in the book). It is Gabriel who is speaking to Daniel in today's passage. He says that Michael, the great prince, the protector of Daniel's people Israel, shall arise. The angel, or archangel, Michael, is the patron angel of Israel. Other nations have their patron angels, not all of them good according to the book of Daniel. Again in an earlier passage, Gabriel describes how he was opposed by the patron angel of Persia. This was reflected on earth by Persian rule over Israel.

Now all this may seem rather far fetched to us. We hold humans responsible for the good and evil they do, rather than blaming it on what's happening in another dimension. But the point is this was a widespread belief in the world in which Jesus was born and the writers of the New Testament lived. The book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament comes from this background with its angels, beasts, horsemen, lake of fire and so on. The idea that the end – whatever that means – would be preceded by a time of suffering has influenced Jesus' words in today's gospel with its descriptions of wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes, famines and birth pangs of the new age. The new age is expressed by Gabriel's words in the Daniel reading about resurrection:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake... .

This is the clearest statement about resurrection in the Old Testament.

Jesus ends his words about what the future holds by telling a short parable – it's at the end of Mark 13, so not part of what we read today. It's about a householder going away on a journey, leaving his servants in charge. They don't know when he will return; woe betide if he find them asleep when he comes back. Stay awake and watch is Jesus' command. He's discouraging speculation about the future and directing us to pay attention to the situation we're in, to our present.

Our present has been shaped by the conflicts of the past we remember today. We have been blessed with the freedom preserved by those who fought in war. It is also true that pains of loss continue to be felt. Armed conflict is a present reality in parts of our world, and the threat of aggression is widespread. There's a questionable morality in parts of the arms trade. The need to stay awake and watch, to be aware of what's going on, is as urgent as ever. And to apply the call of so many at the COP in Glasgow, the Conference of Parties, what is needed is action. I could go on, but I won't. We can all pray heartily that the lessons we learn from the effects of war may enable us to create a just peace for all God's children.