Sermon outline for Remembrance Sunday 2014


Edward Grey, the man who was British Foreign Secretary as the First World War began, wrote in his memoirs,

A friend came to see me on one of the evenings of the last week — he thinks it was on Monday, August 3rd. We were standing at a window of my room in the Foreign Office. It was getting dusk, and the lamps were being lit in the space below on which we were looking. My friend recalls that I remarked on this with the words: "The lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our life-time."

Even he couldn't quite remember whether he said his own most famous words, but they offer the most powerful symbolism we have of what happened one hundred years ago. Many nations, many towns, villages and families - much of the world - entered a period of darkness. The lights went out.

His words seem strangely prescient. When everyone else thought, or hoped, that it would all be over by Christmas, Grey knew that a much longer darkness was beginning to fall. The war itself was over in four years, though the grief and sorrow at the loss of so many lives was felt for many years longer than that. And any historian knows that the war, the 'great' war the war to end all wars, was but the beginning of such radical changes in Europe that some places did not bring the black-out curtains down for decades, just in case. And there are conflicts raging, homes destroyed and sons and daughters killed, in the wider reaches of Europe still today. The lights are still not lit, even a hundred years on. It begins to sounds like a curse in a fairy tale – darkness for a hundred years – and still no-one comes to light the lamps again.

The strange story in Matthew’s Gospel, of the ten bridesmaids, also seems to come from the world of fairy tale – of a bridegroom longed for, of joy anticipated and denied, of those cast out and those welcomed in. And there are lamps that lie unlit, for want of oil, lamps that remain unlit again. It's a strange story, obscure to many a reader. But some readers, or perhaps those who might have heard this when it was first told, would have understood that the oil that lights lamps was a particular kind of oil – and that the story has a kind of code which we need to understand. The oil is not just oil – it is the oil of repentance, the oil of anointing, the holiest of holy oils. So one way of reading this story might be to say that if the feast of life is to come, if joy is to belong to all of us, then we all need the oil of repentance, we all need to think again and to turn around the ways we live; whether that’s you and me as individuals or whether it’s nations and communities.

There’s nothing like war for making us divide the world up into good and bad, into victims and aggressors, into holy and wicked. It’s part of what makes war possible, because it’s so much more difficult to wage war on people that you know to be just like you. And the historians will tell us that part of the huge mistake at the end of the first world war was to punish the German people, to make them pay – to make reparation. Then we let children starve and an economy crash rather than give them anything we had. And part of what that did was to enable the rise of fascism, and the whole cycle of war began again. Perhaps that’s why the churches, after the next war, the second world war, immediately began to work together to help German refugees and families, to provide food for a devastated nation,
to share what little they had with those who had nothing. It’s little remembered that it was this that was the beginning of Christian Aid.

Perhaps the parable, strange though it is, teaches us that it will never be enough if only half the people repent, but that everyone needs the oil of repentance, however righteous was their cause. We shouldn’t just think it’s only others who need it or just hope for the best in a fragile world. We need to be those who can face whatever comes because we know ourselves to be in need of forgiveness, in need of new beginnings. The lights will only go on again, when all people know their need of God, when everyone has oil for lighting.

Sometimes, 100 years on, our response to something like the first world war is one of incomprehension. It seems as bizarre a story as a parable about wise and foolish virgins. Generations of us have written essays about its causes, and historians continue to argue about who bore the most blame. Sometimes, 100 years on, we find it easiest vaguely to blame the forces of imperialism, the absurdity of alliances between monarchies, or the naivety of a kind of patriotism that we no longer, largely, own. But we can never rest with blaming others for the terrors of the world, if the lights are really to go on again. We cannot escape by romanticising the poets or the fallen ones, or by blaming people who do not see now what we see, whether in the past or the present. We need to learn humility and to look deeply into ourselves and the communities and nations we are building today. We need the kind of wisdom that recognises that whoever we are, wherever we stand in the world, we need the oil of repentance, the ability to think again about who we are and what we do. The feast of life will never come if we simply wait for others to repent.

It might be tempting, now, as we look at the world around us, so achingly falling into violence and suffering, to blame others. There are many whom we might wish that they would change their ways. But it is also to our own hands that we must look. We too, all of us, are called to repent of anything in our own lives that does not make for peace. We cannot rely only on the repentance of others. But we can repent ourselves, change our lives, and burn like lights again in the world, if the lamps of peace and justice are to be lit.

In the Psalm for today, Psalm 78, the psalmist reminds us that God commanded our ancestors to teach our children the ways of God, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn. What a beautiful reminder to us of the need to pass on any lessons we learn of the things of God. But also perhaps a hint that every generation must learn for itself the ways of peace in its own times, for each generation will, in the way of things, need to turn around and repent, to seek forgiveness and renewal, to find again the source of the world’s light.

The good news is that God, who loves us beyond measure, is always waiting to open for us the doors to the feast of life. And repentance is always met with forgiveness and grace. We may think that the darkness deepens still, almost every time we listen to the news, but the Gospel holds out the promise always that the light will shine and that it will never be overwhelmed. And even those who were laid in the dark earth, killed in war by the violence of an enemy, for them the New Testament promises that ‘God will bring with him those who have died.’

Edward Grey’s moving words, spoken at a time of gathering darkness, held out the hope that the lamps would, one day, be lit again. Our faith in Jesus Christ, the light of the world, will never let us lose hope.
that one day, even if not in our life time, the lamps of all God’s people; the foolish and the wise, the poor and rich, the stranger and the friends – will shine brightly in a world truly at peace. Let that be our prayer this day, after 100 years…

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