

Remembrance Sunday 2019

Today we are going not only to look back to the past but on to the future.

In the Bible God encourages us to remember his goodness to us in the past.

In the Old Testament the Israelites were particularly encouraged to remember how God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Later they were also encouraged to remember how God had provided for all their needs, during their forty years in the wilderness, after leaving Egypt and before entering the Promised Land. Before they entered it, Moses, their leader, said to them "Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years ... feeding you ... Your clothes did not wear out ... During those 40 years". (Deut. 8.2-4).

In several of the Psalms, which is the Old Testament hymn book, various events along the way are listed for remembrance and praise, events in which the Lord gave his people victory over those who opposed them. For example, some verses from Psalm 135, about his judgement on wicked nations, which practised the horrors of child sacrifice and other abominations –

"He sent his signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants. He struck down many nations and killed mighty kings – Sihon King of the Amorites, Og king of Bashan and all the kings of Canaan – and he gave their land as an inheritance, an inheritance to his people Israel." (Ps. 135.9-12).

In the New Testament we are encouraged to remember the teaching of the Lord Jesus, and we are particularly encouraged to remember his death on the Cross, bearing our sins, and especially to do so through the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion service: how he laid down his life for us. "Do this", Jesus said at the Last Supper, "in remembrance of me". And the apostle Paul added "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1.Cor. 11.25-26).

So it is good, today, to remember God's goodness in the past to our nation, especially in the two world wars, and to give thanks for those who laid down their lives so that we might have freedom from tyranny.

Some/Many of us are too young to remember the events themselves, but we can all call to mind what we have learned about them.

A few weeks ago the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War was remembered. Nine months later there began a period of nearly 18 months in which Britain and her Commonwealth stood alone against the might of Nazi Germany, Italy and their allies. God gave our nation leaders, particularly King George VI and Winston Churchill, who inspired us to believe that we could, with God's help, ultimately, be victorious, despite the strength and the initial victories of our aggressive foes.

Reference is sometimes made to the national days of prayer for which King George VI called in the Second World War, particularly just before the evacuation of our army from Dunkirk in May 1940, but also on other days later in that war.

But, looking through my file of papers saved from my parents' collection years ago, I came across the proclamation of George VI's father, King George V, calling for a national day of prayer and thanksgiving at the beginning of January 1918. I will read you part of the king's proclamation –

“To my people -

“At such a time I would call upon you to devote a special day to prayer that we may have the clear-sightedness and strength necessary to the victory of our cause. This victory will be gained only if we steadfastly remember the responsibility which rests upon us, and in a spirit of reverent obedience ask the blessing of Almighty God upon our endeavours. With hearts grateful for the divine guidance which has led us so far towards our goal, let us seek to be enlightened in our understanding and fortified in our courage in facing the sacrifices we may yet have to make before our work is done.

“I therefore hereby appoint January 6th – the first Sunday of the year – to be set aside as a special day of prayer and thanksgiving in all the churches throughout my dominions, and require that this Proclamation be read at the services held on that day.” GEORGE R. I.

I also found two other services of national prayer in the First World War. So in the Second World War King George VI was following in his father's footsteps.

I also found a small book of selections from eleven speeches made during the Second World War – including ones by the King, by Neville Chamberlain, by the Queen, by Winston Churchill and by Princess Elizabeth, now our Queen, then aged 14, speaking on the BBC Children's Hour.

One thing in common, through each one of those speeches, was reference to trust in God or to dependence on him. The nation looked to God in our time of need.

And this trust in God was expressed by many other people in leadership in Britain.

In November 1942 the largest seaborne task force that there had ever been, up to that point, sailed mostly from Britain, but some from America, and made its way in total and successful secrecy to the coasts of Morocco and Algeria, in North Africa, with the aim, after landing, of pressing eastwards and freeing Tunisia.

Most of those who had embarked did so without knowing where they were going. They went on trust.

I have my father's copy of the Information Bulletin which was handed out during the voyage. A bulletin describing the geography and population of those North African countries, together with foodstuffs, climate and many other matters. In the foreword Kenneth Anderson, the British general in command of what was called the First Army, concluded “Our fathers of old were never ashamed to ask God's blessing on their enterprises, because they openly acknowledged there were many things man cannot do by his own unaided strength ... Whether we admit it openly or not we all know in our hearts that there is above us a Power who made this world and all that is

in it, including mankind. Let us, therefore, unashamedly and humbly, ask God's help in our endeavours ..."

The First Army, and their American and Free French colleagues, did not achieve their object as fast as they had hoped, because the Germans rapidly reinforced Tunisia from Italy. But in the following July Tunis fell, and a quarter of a million German soldiers were taken prisoner, and took no further part in the war. Then the First Army joined other armies of nations in liberating Sicily and then, gradually, the rest of Italy.

Kenneth Anderson's foreword is just one example among many of how our nation looked to God for victory over the tyranny of Nazi Germany, Japan and their allies.

So we have gathered this morning to remember, with thanksgiving to God for victories granted to us and to our allies, in both world wars, and in other conflicts since, and especially to give thanks for all those who for our tomorrow gave their today.

We have remembered the challenging past. But now let us look on to the glorious future.

The second part of our Bible reading today, from the book of the minor Old Testament prophet Micah, is a usual reading for Remembrance Sunday. I have heard it read many times, but never recall a sermon based on it.

The opening words of the book of Micah are "The word of the Lord came to Micah of Moresheth during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." (Mic. 1.1) These words are very similar to the opening words of the book of the prophet Isaiah, except that Isaiah's ministry began one reign earlier, in the reign of King Uzziah. So Micah was a slightly younger contemporary of Isaiah.

What has become for us a Remembrance Sunday reading is also found in the second chapter of Isaiah's prophecy, leading to commentators speculating whether Micah borrowed it from Isaiah or vice versa. It does not matter which.

But today we also heard Micah's words that preceded it, giving us the context. There were false prophets around. The Lord said through Micah, such prophets "lead my people astray" (Mic. 3.5), and they "tell fortunes for money" (3.11). God also spoke of leaders "who despise justice and distort all that is right" (3.9).

The false prophets were saying "Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us." (3.11)

Micah's response to this false teaching was this word from the Lord –

"Therefore because of you, Zion will be ploughed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the Temple mound overgrown with thickets." (3.12)

These words were remembered a century or more later, when the prophet Jeremiah was also speaking words from the Lord, prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem if his people did not repent of their wickedness.

Some of the priests and other prophets said Jeremiah “should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against the city.” (Jer. 26.11).

But “Some of the elders of the land stepped forward and said to the entire assembly of people, ‘Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah. He told all the people of Judah, “This is what the Lord Almighty says ‘Zion will be ploughed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the Temple Hill a mound overgrown with thickets.’” Did Hezekiah king of Judah or anyone else in Judah put (Micah) to death? Did not Hezekiah fear the Lord and seek his favour? And did not the Lord relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he pronounced against them?’” (Jer. 26.17-19)

So Jeremiah’s life was spared, but sadly the majority did not heed the warning the Lord gave through him, and Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed not long afterwards, and the people were taken into exile.

But Micah’s prophecy did not end there. He looked further ahead, as we heard in our reading. “In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains;

it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Mic.4.1-2). What a marvellous prophecy!

We are still looking forward to that taking place. At the moment it is difficult to see that happening literally to Jerusalem as it is now, but who knows what will come to pass in the future?

But it is for the next verses that this reading is favoured for Remembrance Sunday. What a wonderful series of four promises they are for the future. Let us hear these four promises again.

Firstly, The Lord “will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.” In other words there will be no more territorial wars. The Lord God will draw the boundaries of nations, he will settle all disputes, and he will make righteous peace treaties for all. No more wars. Praise the Lord! Alleluia!

Secondly, “They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.”

The weapons of war will be turned into agricultural instruments. Guns, tanks, torpedoes, missiles, bombs, you name it, they will become ploughs, pruning hooks, spades, rakes, forks, hoes. Tools with a mission! What wonderful recycling! Praise the Lord! Alleluia!

Thirdly, “Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more.” Armed conflict will cease, and so military training will be no more. Tyneham, Salisbury Plain and other military training areas worldwide can all be repossessed. Praise the Lord! Alleluia!

And fourthly, and best of all, “Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken.” (4.3-4)

That had been written earlier in the Old Testament, in the first book of Kings (1 K 4.25), about a lengthy time of peace, “During (King) Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel ... lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree.” But sadly it did not last then. Solomon died and war broke out.

However, one day there will be lasting peace throughout the world.

Tyrannical dictatorships will be a thing of the past. No one will be sleeping in doorways, or crammed into refugee camps. Everyone will have something, enough, and no one will be fighting to take more from anyone else. They will all be content with what they have, in a modest lifestyle. Praise the Lord! Alleluia!

I cannot tell how all this will come about. But God promises here that it will!

I cannot tell how this will all fit in with the other events that the Bible tells us will happen, when the Lord Jesus returns to the earth.

But this I know – Jesus will come, and there will be peace.

As a hymnwriter has put it –

“I cannot tell how all the lands shall worship,

When, at God’s bidding, every storm is stilled.

Or who can say how great the jubilation

When all the hearts of men with love are filled.

But this I know, the skies will thrill with rapture,

And myriad, myriad human voices sing,

And earth to heaven, and heaven to earth, will answer:

‘At last the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is King!’

Peace for ever!

Alleluia! Praise the Lord! Amen!

(Let us stand to sing that hymn.)