

Sermon for Remembrance: 11 November 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“The Way of Love and the End of War” (Ephesians 4:25-5:2 and John 15:9-17)

God, our Father, send your Holy Spirit, to activate and enlarge our spirits, and bring healing to our wounded souls. May my words speak spirit to spirit. In the name of our loving, liberating and life-giving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

- The universe was made in love and intended to carry on in the way of love.
- The end of war must always be peace, or to put it another way, the purpose of war is to fight for peace.
- War is horrific and it must be resisted at all times.
- In this week we can remember those who died in times of war and we can honour their memory by choosing to pledge ourselves to work for peace in the way we live.

- Even in times of tragedy there are inspiring stories of human kindness.
- Human beings have an extraordinary capacity to be destructive - to steal and kill and destroy.
- But they also have an innate potential to do great things in love for one another, things that are often seen most clearly in times of difficulty or darkness.

I came across a the story of two nurses who left Britain to go and nurse on the battle fields of the First World War. The story is in a recent book written by Diane Atkinson, entitled *Elsie and Mairi Go To War - Two Extraordinary Women On The Western Front*.

Elsie was a widow aged 30 and Mairi only 18 when they set off. They had met because they were both motorcycle enthusiasts - quite a rarity in the early 1900's. Their story gives us an insight into the horror and futility of war but also the amazing spirit possible in humanity.

Elsie and Mairi would put their lives on the line rushing out into no mans land to tend to the wounded and escort them back to their make shift

hospital. They had frequent trips back to Britain where they raised hundreds of pounds to fund their very humanitarian contribution to the war effort.

Here's a small quote from the book. "More than 3/4 of a million British and French and an unknown number of German soldiers were killed on the Somme, from 1 July to 18 November, when the first snow of winter fell. On 10 August, while the battle was still raging, the first ever war documentary, The Battle of the Somme, was screened to stocked audiences in cinemas all over Britain. The film showed the British public what the men had endured and were enduring. Accompanied by a pianist or orchestra, the 80 unite film showed the Western Front in an unforgiving light. Twenty million tickets sold to the British population 43 million. Public opinion was dazed and apprehensive about the future".

Elsie and Mhairi somehow managed to survive the war, and even went on to serve in the Second World War. Their story is a story of selfless sacrifice which is there to inspire those of us who lived after them. As the author says, "the story has a resonance today in the brave and selfless who work for aid agencies and charities all round the world. Risking their lives to help others live theirs".

During the second world war, Etty Hillesum died aged 29 in Auschwitz. Before being sent to Auschwitz she was imprisoned in Westerbork transit camp, where she spent her time supporting other people who were facing deportation to Auschwitz. In her diary on 29/9/1942 she wrote:

"Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world."

The importance of standing against evil. It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who famously said, "silence in the face of evil is itself evil ... not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act".

April 1933 - First national convention of "German Christians." Slogan: "The State of Adolf Hitler appeals to the Church, and the Church has to hear his call." Hitler had said in 1928 that "we tolerate no one in our ranks who attacks the ideas of Christianity. Our movement is Christian".

April 1933 – Hitler appoints a State Commissioner of the Evangelical Church, creating what was called a “Reich Church.”

September 1933 – Martin Niemöller establishes the Pastors’ Emergency League in opposition to the “German Christians.” This opposition movement became known as the Confessing Church, and was led by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others.

Bonhoeffer’s theology for resisting the evil of Nazism could be reflected in this quote, “If I sit next to a madman as he drives a car into a group of innocent bystanders. I can’t as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe, then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver”.

Can you see why Bonhoeffer described the faith of the German Church as a “Christ-less Christianity” and as “cheap grace”, as the preaching of grace without requiring repentance? Nice words but no action, or the wrong action?

November 1933 – demonstration staged by “German Christians.” Dr. Reinhold Krause delivers speech claiming that the “German Christian” movement is the next stage of the German Reformation; the first step being to get rid of the Old Testament “with its Jewish morality... And stories of cattle dealers,” and also to purge the New Testament of all “superstitious” passages.

November 1933 – Pastors’ Emergency League demands the denunciation of Krause.

January 1934 – Niemöller and theologian Karl Barth draw up the first anti-Nazi confession.

April 1934 – Dr. August Jäger, a man of anti-Christian convictions, is appointed Legal Administrator of the Reich Church.

April 1934 – The leaders of the Pastors’ Emergency League form the Constitutional Evangelical Church of Germany and declare it to be the true church within the German Evangelical Church.

May 1934 – Barmen Synod. Karl Barth drafts the Declaration of Barmen, which is unanimously adopted by the Synod. It stated, “we reject the false doctrine that the State should and could become the single totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church’s vocation as well”.

Most of these confessing Christians were imprisoned by the Nazi regime and many of them, like Bonhoeffer, were put to death.

Jesus said, 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'

If the end of war is peace, then is war ever just?

Theologians through the centuries have asked this question. Think of Augustine in the 4th century and Thomas Aquinas in the 13th, both of whom agreed in the end that there are occasions when war is justified. Others are uncomfortable with this position, arguing that war can never be just.

It's not really a question I want us to think too deeply about today but I will say that in a world which is disassociated from Love, as the Creative Source of Life, then war will probably be inevitable, as we can see even in the Scriptures of the Old Testament.

When people, and nations, are disassociated from Love, which has the power to redeem, then unregenerate human nature will show itself in the rise of a self centred nationalism that will do all it can to fight its way to power. It will not yield until it has its way. It might even claim to be of God, as happened in Nazi Germany, and which still happens today, if left unchecked.

Many of you will remember the inspired preaching at this years royal wedding. The preacher was Michael Curry, and he preached about the way of love. When love is the way, the earth becomes a sanctuary. When love is the way we will lay down our swords and shields down by the riverside to study war no more. Love is the way, love is the only way. We must discover the redemptive power of love.

There's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can. There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will. There's power in love to show us the way to live”.

Together with others, Michael Curry has also this year been part of a movement of opposition in USA, which is not dissimilar to that of the Confessing Church's opposition in the 1930's. The Reclaiming Jesus movement started with a few church leaders getting together to write a new

confession of faith. To put into words what believing meant and therefore what should be rejected. For example,

Jesus said,

“So this is my command: Love each other deeply, as much as I have loved you. For the greatest love of all is a love that sacrifices all. And this great love is demonstrated when a person sacrifices his life for his friends”.

In Elsie and Mhairi, in Ety Hillesum and Dietrich Bonhoeffer we can see how the power of Love drives people to do sacrificial things. When love is the way, the darkness diminishes. When love is the way, peace will flourish.

The promise of Jesus today is that you are chosen. You are chosen to bear fruit and to bear it in a way that it keeps on bearing more.

You have been called into association with Love. Will you respond to that call by giving your consent for Love to have its way so that you may live in such a way that you share the gift of peace in everything you do and everything you are? For that is who you truly are.

You were made by peace itself in order to bear peace.

You were made by Love itself in order to bear Love in all things.

As the apostle Paul puts it, Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words and slander and instead be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

In the name of our loving, liberating and life-giving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.