

Remembrance Day 2019 – 1115 Service

They shall beat their swords in ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. They shall not learn war anymore.

The Anglican priest and Guardian writer Giles Fraser tells of a conversation he once had with his father. Giles was a fiercely idealistic, left wing, pacifist 17 year old fired up by the visions like that of Micah; his father worked on developing guided missile systems. Their relationship was tense. How could you do this, Giles would angrily and constantly complain? How can you make your living out of violence and destruction, out of getting ready to kill? His father never really engaged in the discussion, never really spoke about what he did – except for once, when the subject of the Holocaust came up – the Holocaust from which he had fled as a young Jewish boy. ‘They’ll never do that to us again,’ he said. ‘We’ll never let them do that to us again.’ That’s why he worked on the missiles.¹

We’re caught in a dilemma. The God of Micah and the God of Jesus Christ hates war. He who lives by the sword, shall die by the sword, says Jesus – and in so saying, thought the early church, he disarmed every soldier. To wage war is to kill God’s beloved children, even if they wear an enemy uniform, even if they have done and do terrible things – they are God’s beloved children, and to kill them is always and everywhere a sin.

But then ... what do you do when the Nazis are coming? Ploughshares and pruning hooks will not be much use to you then. Then you need swords – and let us not be romantic: ‘swords’ really means machine guns and bombs and missiles and all the other ways we have invented of killing each other. Swords means killing, lots and lots of killing – and those getting killed are not all bad and wicked people. They’re on the wrong side, maybe the terribly and dreadfully wrong side, but most of them are just like you and me. And even the ones who aren’t – the ones who really are the wicked – even they are still God’s children. God’s beloved children.

¹ Fraser recalls this conversation in the *Confessions* podcast with Yoram Hazony, October 2019.

So there's our dilemma. We can't just let the Nazis come; we know we have to kill – and yet we also know that when we kill, we go adrift from God. We have gone wrong, deeply and darkly wrong. There is no cause so righteous as to let us off that hook. Not one.

So Remembrance Day has to be about more than honouring those who have fought and died for their country. It *is* indeed about that. We owe a huge debt to those men and women who kept this country free, and indeed kept our civilisation alive. Their courage and sacrifice and honour is something before which all of us should bow our heads in awe and gratitude.

But it must also be about remembering the cost. The terrible, terrible damage done to our one human family by the killing of so many. It is about remembering each of those individual lives and how precious they were. How precious, whether British, German, Japanese, Russian or American. How precious, whether Nazi or IS. And how loved by their mum, their dad, their lovers, their children. It is about remembering the cost to God, who made each precious one of them: the sheer grief of our Heavenly Father at his creation, broken.

And if it is about remembering, it is also about the future. 'They'll never do that to us again', said Mr Fraser. 'We'll never let them do that to us again.' And in part, that means working on guided missile systems, and having soldier and ships and planes and missiles, and not being ashamed of those things, and honouring those who serve in that way. But it will also mean working for peace. Wars don't just happen like freak weather patterns – they grow. They grow out of things we have some control over: out of poverty, out of humiliation, out of neglect, out of failure to work together, to speak each other's languages, to invest in aid and diplomacy and education, in the protection of the environment and the sharing of resources. That old saying 'if you want peace, prepare for war' might have some truth in it. But oh, so much more, if you want peace, prepare for peace. Invest in peace. Build for peace. Take learning peace at least as seriously, *more* seriously than learning war.

And that will be the way to truly honour both our God, and the fallen

Amen.