

Remembrance Day Sermon 2024

‘They shall not learn war any more’.

I’m going to take a slightly more autobiographical approach to this sermon than I would usually do. Please do bear with me. I hope that though it’s personal, something will come out of it that speaks to us all.

When I was eleven years old, a police officer was murdered about a hundred yards from my house. He was on patrol, and IRA terrorists crept up behind him and shot him in the back of the head. I remember looking out the window and seeing his colleagues run to him, too late. His body lay just where we caught the bus to school every morning. His home was a mile away. He had two young daughters.

A year later, I’m twelve. I come back home from a Remembrance ceremony, just like the one we have just attended. I was in my Scout uniform. The news headlines came on, and we hear the first reports of the IRA bombing a Remembrance Day parade in Enniskillen. Twelve people died. There had been Scouts, just like me, caught in the blast.

That was the first twenty years of my life. Every few days, another bomb, another killing, another funeral. It was not just the IRA of course. Indeed, thanks to loyalist terrorists, I almost didn’t exist. My father was nearly murdered by one of their bombs three years before I was born. He was lucky to be pulled alive from the rubble. My mother believed he was dead. So did the loyalist crowd hurling abuse as the rescuers worked. Thankfully, they were wrong. But that bomb, and the physical and psychological damage it did, distorted our family life for many years to come.

I tell you all this to explain why I hate terrorists. I do not use that word ‘hate’ lightly. I cannot begin to describe to you the depth of my loathing for both republican and loyalist terrorists, my cold settled despising of everything about them.

This morning, in Belfast, Michelle O'Neill, Vice-President of Sinn Fein and First Minister of Northern Ireland is taking part in a Remembrance Day ceremony. Let's be very clear about what being Vice President of Sinn Fein means. It means, at the very, very, least, that you applauded the murder of that police officer. You may not actually *be* a terrorist, but you cheer for those who are. You accept that the Enniskillen bomb may have been a tragedy, but it is, you say, the kind of thing that happens in war and there was no alternative. The people who planted the bomb were, in your mind, brave patriotic freedom fighters.

And today, quite astonishingly, Michelle O'Neill is laying a wreath for Remembrance Day. She is standing alongside British soldiers, and police officers, scouts, veterans. The kind of people her friends murdered in Enniskillen. It is a quite staggering thing for an Irish Republican to do. In its own way, it is courageous. Her own grassroots are utterly appalled. That, however, doesn't make it any easier for me, or people like me, to watch. It turns my stomach.

They shall not learn war anymore, says the prophet Micah.

Well, I have learned war. I have learned war deep in my heart. Not that I would ever have picked up a gun, or a bomb. No, I mean have I learned to hate, to despise. To judge my enemy, the terrorist, their sympathisers, so harshly, so bitterly, so finally. To freeze them: to say this person could never, ever change. This person could never, ever be anything other than the outcast, the enemy.

It means when I see Michelle O'Neill laying the wreath, it is very, very easy to be cynical. To think it's a ploy, that it's clever politics. That it cannot be what she says it is: a genuine attempt to show respect for her Unionist, British neighbours, a genuine attempt at reconciliation. I do not trust her. I cannot trust her. She is a cheerleader for murder.

And yet, and yet. *They shall not learn war anymore*. If those words mean anything, they mean I have to unclench. I have to allow for the possibility that there's something new here. That maybe, just maybe, there's more to my enemy than I thought. I need to recognise that my hatred – however justified it might be – is actually my problem. It's blinding me from seeing things as they really are, from seeing people as they really are.

And, once you think that, you begin to see that it might have blinded you to other things as well. Like, for instance, what made your enemy the way they are. Do not mistake me, I still revile them. I still, to some degree, hate. But, I'm coming to realise that hatred has actually made me a bit stupid. A bit slow. A bit unwilling to hear the other side of the story: about the terrible things that my side did - the side that prided itself on law and order, on decency, on not being terrorists. I still think we were better than them, much better. And that really, really matters. But my God, there was also a dark side. There was injustice, brutality, wickedness *that my side did ...* and, maybe, if life had been different, if I'd been born and raised in different circumstances, with different experiences, maybe I'd have taken the same path Michelle O'Neill did. I think not. I hope not. But Perhaps.

I hope you realise that this is not just a sermon about me, or about Northern Ireland. This is about every war there's ever been. Even the ones, perhaps especially the ones, where we are sure we were right. Wars where the cause was noble and just, where we honour those who fought and died, where we give thanks for them. Even in those wars, it is unbelievably hard, almost impossible, to fight without beginning to hate. Interestingly, it seems that often that isn't true for the people actually doing the fighting, the actual front-line soldiers. It is, it seems, for some at least harder to despise people up close. But for many of the rest of us that temptation is almost overwhelming. The temptation to shrink the enemy down, to dehumanise them, to make them monsters.

Almost overwhelming. Actually, for me, I would say it *is* overwhelming. I would say that left to my own devices, I would be trapped in that pattern, in that viciousness. And that is one reason it is so important that Remembrance Day is also a God-day, that we meet not merely at the memorial but also in Church. Because what being in front of God teaches you – especially *this* God, this man stretched out on the Cross – is that whatever is going to make this world right and whole and good, it isn't my righteousness, my justice, my anger, my hate. I'm part of the problem. Me, Michelle O'Neill, all of us, in our different, complicated ways: we are all part of the problem. We belong together – even though I hate to admit it - we belong together, all of us, in need of mercy, healing, forgiveness. And it is held out to all of us, by Him. Not because we are worthy, not because we are righteous, not because we are better than them, but simply because He made, he loves us, and he will not give up on us. And he will not give up on them, either. And if, one day, there will be justice, there will be vengeance for all the wrongs that have been done, for all the terror, all the murder, it will not come from me, or from any human power. It will come from Him, the only one qualified to give it. And it will be justice shot through with loving mercy.

Coming to terms with that, letting that happen, is bewildering, mysterious, slow, and frustrating. It is much easier to hate. Easier to maintain our own sense of rightness, of pride. Easier, but endless. Futile. The only way out of our bitterness is the unlearning of war. The dropping of our defences. The kneeling here, with our enemies, before the awesome gentleness, the utter peacefulness, of God on the Cross. That what will unlock us. That's what will set us free.

He is our peace. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.