

Introduction

There can be few sights so upsetting and hopeless as a battlefield when fighting is over. The true cost of the conflict becomes apparent as the devastation is revealed. As we have recently seen on our television screens the chaos of the wars in Syria and Lebanon we see a small part of the human cost and terror of battle.

This year on the centenary of the end of the First World War, named then as 'the war to end all war', people have been engaged in many imaginative ways in, not only showing the cost and horror of war, but in putting faces to the names and numbers. Here in Thriplow and Fowlmere we have taken part in 'There but not there' and the silhouettes on the chairs here represent some of the twelve young men from Thriplow who so proudly left to fight for their country never to return. In Fowlmere there are another twelve dotted about the village, and two representing those lost in the Second World War.

Every night this week ten thousand torches are being lit at the Tower of London and, today, on numerous beaches around the country, images of those who died are being brushed into the sand – to be washed away when the tide comes in. Although the daughter of a fighter pilot and brought up in war zones I only really became aware of the personal cost of war when, in my twenties, I read the book Testament of Youth by Vera Britten. Due to her experience of loss and horror during the First World War she remained a life time pacifist. What her personal account helped me to see was the cost in lives lost, and lives changed forever that all wars carry.

True we believe that they have won us peace but the conflicts of the last hundred years show that war is not over and nothing ever seems to be resolved by battle which just results in resentment and humiliation. We remember people's sacrifice with a sense of sadness and also deep gratitude for all they have won for us. Yet when we consider the price of war it is appropriate to think about reconciliation and resolution of conflict. We live in a time of international conflict and uncertainty when our country is at war with terrorism and many of us are uneasy about what the future holds for us.

At the heart of the Bible's message is reconciliation. Its whole thrust is about reconciliation between mankind and God and the price that God was prepared to pay in order to bring that about. If we can take the message of the Good News to societies torn apart by conflict, helping people to take its message seriously will alter lives and heal communities.

And this is the crux of the matter. If we were able to really absorb and live by the message of the Bible it would transform our church, our

society and our world. It would bring healing and hope and reconciliation where there is only bitterness and hatred.

Conflict can be creative. It is not by itself always a bad thing. The scriptures don't condemn disagreement. The simple fact is that God has made us all to be different. That difference can be hugely enriching and creative. It enables us to see things from a variety of perspectives. The best in art challenges our existing view of a subject and enables us to see it in a different way; as we have seen in the memorial installations for this Armistice Day; and dissatisfaction with the way something is, often acts as a stimulus for change and enables us to make new discoveries.

Conflict comes when we find it hard to reconcile the differences between us. The problem is not in the difference of view or opinion in itself but in the way that we handle the differences. Conflict has the potential to be destructive. The warning in scripture is not related to the conflict itself but to what we do with it. It is surprising how quickly we can move from a position which says, "We disagree. Let's talk about it." To one in which we say, "We disagree. It's too painful to talk about it."

The problem with being in this position is that if there is no resolution of differences we can move from a position of simply feeling hurt to wanting to get even and to win. In the case of conflict between races the desire to injure and hurt can easily become the move to genocide - the attempt to remove all memory of the other race from the earth. We have seen this often in the past twenty years in conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, the treatment of the Kurds by Iraq and even now in the conflicts in Gaza, Afghanistan and Syria and Myanmar

The scriptures make a clear connection between the death of Christ and reconciliation with God. That reconciliation becomes a message that extends reconciliation to all and between all. In our second reading Paul tells us that because Jesus died for us on the cross those things that separate us from God and from each other, the barriers that separate us have been destroyed. God's intention is to bring human beings together in one nation, all knowing ourselves loved by God and able to share his love with each other.

When Jesus died on the cross for us he carried all our pain and anger, all our disagreements and hurt. They were discharged and healed. In dying on the cross, Jesus didn't fight back against those who wanted to destroy him but instead he absorbed the anger and violence of the universe. It needed to go no further. It is that action of Christ that offers us a new way of dealing with conflict and of beginning our ministry of reconciliation.

Soccer star David Beckham found notoriety in 1998 when the England team was dismissed from the World Cup Finals on a penalty shootout. Beckham had been sent off for a foolish foul that had left the England team with only ten players for half of the match. Taking the view that the defeat might not have happened if he had not acted so irresponsibly, the media rounded on him and blamed him for the defeat.

After the England manager Glenn Hoddle asked the public to give Beckham another chance, The Bible Society issued a press release, suggesting that this was an opportunity for people to exercise forgiveness. Among the flood of responses from national and local media, one radio station carried out a poll of listeners and learned that a very high percentage were not prepared to forgive him.

Reflecting on this incident in his book "Why the cross" Martin Robinson, Bible Society's director of mission and Theology said this: "Why would people steadfastly refuse to forgive someone who had never injured them personally (though clearly some England supporters take defeat very personally!) Could it be that the reason for this was that it is easier to have a scapegoat and that to forgive would be somehow to bear the defeat themselves". Of course we all know that David Beckham redeemed himself and became a hero in 2002 when he scored that hat-trick against Germany but he went through a very difficult time when he was reviled and blamed for his actions.

The inability to forgive can be very far reaching. We may not think small grudges are worth worrying over. But if we are not able to forgive each other in the small things then we certainly won't be able to do so in the large. The challenge that the Bible faces us with is: Are we able to take its message of reconciliation and forgiveness seriously? Are we able to let it challenge us and change the way we live with each other? If we are looking for peace and harmony in our world we have to start with ourselves, our families, our communities, and our churches.

In our first reading the prophet Ezekiel tells of a vision he had of a valley where a great army had been defeated in battle, an entirely hopeless situation where the valley floor was covered with dry bones with no breath of life amongst them and no hope of renewal. The question the prophet is asked is, 'can these bones live?' The answer, of course, from a human point of view is an emphatic 'No' and for anyone who has lost a loved one in conflict we know that they can never be replaced. This week with the silhouettes in our churches I have found myself thinking of those who had an empty space beside them. The thousands of women who lost sweethearts in the First World War, the mothers who lost sons and children who lost fathers – and it has continued in every war since. When we kill a human being they are lost to us forever.

The question posed to the prophet was, 'Can the bones live?' Can an absolutely hopeless situation be restored? Can destroyed hopes and aspirations live again? The Bible teaches us, and as a Christian I believe, that God is able to breathe new life into hopeless situation and to bring renewal out of destruction. Through his death on the cross for us Jesus Christ has made it possible for us to be forgiven our wrongdoing and to learn to forgive others who have done us wrong. We need to ask God to fill us with his Holy Spirit to bring about change and new life in us, our communities and our world. "Christians have to be the light and salt of this world and bring back peacefulness and togetherness."

Going forward from this anniversary we need to give ourselves to seek reconciliation, to work for peace and above all to NEVER Forget.

Let us pray;

O God, creator and redeemer, ruler of all

As this time of remembrance we ask that you will grant us

light to guide us,

the courage to follow you

And the love to heal

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**