Sermon for St James Remembrance Sunday 14.11.21
By Rev Kevin Barnard

based on the Bible readings Rev 21:1-7; Matthew 5:43-end

To-day people will spend a lot of time looking at monuments. They gather by war memorials and cenotaphs and for some a name on the monument may mean something special. Some will pause and remember a loved one, a friend or family member lost in war. Some will remember what they have themselves lost because they have had to leave their own country, they have lost home and work and maybe do not know if their family is still alive. We are used to seeing blue plaques put up to remember special people, inventors, doctors, builders, soldiers, explorers, merchants, the people whose names are found in history books. One soldier is remembered on a blue plaque here in Bradford. Do you know who he is? You may have gone past his plaque on the way to shop in Foster Square. He was not a general and is not remembered for winning the V.C. or carrying out some great mission. He is simply named as Andrew, a soldier who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of his time in the forces. Returned to civilian life, he lost his home and while on the streets he became addicted to drugs. He slept rough here in Bradfield from 2004 until 2006. And he needed peace here, on the streets of Bradford. There are plenty of stories about people for whom the absence of war is not the same as peace.

And those words from the gospel call on us not to be peaceful people, not to become inoffensive mice who can smugly say, ‘I never did anyone any harm,’ but to be peace-makers. We cannot settle for a world or a community where conflict is kept away because of the use or abuse of power, because threats are strong or prosperity is gained for some at the cost of the suffering of others in another place. In His call on people to be peace-makers Jesus is spelling out part of what that perfection which is the completion of human nature is to which we are called in the Sermon on the Mount, and it has been said that none of the Beatitudes as that list we have just heard is known can be taken in isolation from the others.

So what does it mean to be a peace-maker? First, let’s not beat about the bush. If there is no peace with God there is no real peace. Conflict of any kind, between nations or within communities or within families or inside people flows from sin, and we need the healing of God’s forgiveness. If we are ourselves not humbly repentant we are in danger of blundering on and thinking that we can impose ‘the Christian solution’, while leaving unrecognised and unrenounced the ambitions, greed, fears and resentments that lurk inside our own hearts and lives. And that peace is first the gift of God. In our first reading we heard of the new Jerusalem. You may like the hymn ‘Jerusalem’, and it is, certainly a stirring song. But it gets things very wrong on an important point. In that song we sing about our building of Jerusalem, but the Bible talks of Jerusalem as the gift and creation of God. It is not that we are called upon just to sit back and let God do all the work, but we must be careful of identifying any politics, any arrangement of life which is of purely human devising with the coming of the new Jerusalem. Stalin, Hitler and plenty before and after them have thought they were building the perfect city.

And then any true peace must be founded in justice and a readiness to work for the healing of the situation which led to the conflict in the first place. When one French general saw the terms of the Treaty of Versailles which was the outcome of the First World War he declared that it was not a peace but a twenty-five years’ truce. He was optimistic! That treaty affirmed the vindictiveness of the victors and visited punishment on the vanquished. The troops may have withdrawn from Iraq or Afghanistan, but have they left peace behind? There may be a Good Friday Agreement, but is there peace in Northern Ireland? Peace for the Christian is a matter of healing and comforting, and that means strengthening. Jesus greets the disciples with the word ‘Peace’ when He comes to them on the lake and when He comes to them in the upper room.

We are at the end of two weeks of discussing climate change. The world leaders will go back, the rich to security and ease, the poor to problems with which they have been left to struggle on their own for too long. The basic needs of life, shelter and food and water, are at a high price. Once people fought for gold. It may not be long before we see wars fought for water or a few sacks of grain, before migration as people flee famine leads to pressures which cause political upheaval in the seemingly comfortable countries and then to conflict or the refugees are exploited by those who would feed them but only if they can arm them and use them against an enemy not of their choosing in a cause they cannot understand. And that need not mean only conflict in the sense of outright war. There is peace in Afghanistan of a sort, but the plight of refugees and their sheer number can easily lead to tensions in the countries to which they go. Yes, we must give to support them in their basic needs, but are we ready to seek the good of the whole community into which they have come – and that which they have left?

I said that we need peace with God as His gift, but that does not mean that we cannot work to fulfil the commandment to love our neighbour by working with non-Christians. The Holy Spirit is not confined. The works and efforts of the world, Christian and non-Christian, are like the cry of those who called on Jesus to heal them and no Christian can retreat into thinking that he is all right because even if the world is consumed by a nuclear conflict tomorrow he has his place in heaven guaranteed. Jesus declares that the peace-makers will be called God’s children. That ‘will be called’ means God will call them His children. But that is for the future, they will be declared to be, when the King comes and raises that question of how we have treated each other by declaring ‘I was hungry...I was thirsty...naked...a stranger….sick….in prison...’ How we respond by reaching out to heal will indicate whether we have been peace-makers.

**Some points that might be worth considering**

Is there such a thing as a just war or should Christians be pacifists?

Should Britain keep nuclear weapons?

What are the possible causes of conflict in Bradford?

Where are there conflicts in Britain? How might they grow or be resolved?

What does it mean to have peace with God?