

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Remembrance

“Peace and safety” In very basic terms this is what most people want from life. We reason that if we are at peace and if we are safe everything else that is good will follow; prosperity, relationships, children, success, economic growth, happiness.

If we can live in peace and safety then all will be well. And in lots of ways you can't fault that line of thinking, the reality is though that it can lull us into a false sense of security.

One of the most famous examples of this was Neville Chamberlain's famous declaration on 30th September 1938 that after the Munich agreement and Anglo-German declaration had been signed there would be “peace in our time”. But the following day the German occupation of Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia began and less than a year later Germany invaded Poland and Europe was plunged into the Second World War.

The two problems were apparent; one leader's blind hunger for power and one leader's blind hunger for peace. Whilst Chamberlain was working with the best intentions he was blind to the very real and very imminent danger which he and the whole of the world was in.

And there is always a real need to be aware of any present danger and to not close our eyes and pretend that everything will be alright. That is why we are so grateful to the armed forces in our country who protect us, who keep a look out for danger and who rescue us in our hour of need. That is why we stop and remember those who have fallen in conflicts past and present to enable us to live in peace and safety.

And in our reading from the Bible today, as Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica (modern-day Greece) because he wants to encourage them to be ready for the Day of the Lord, the time when Jesus will return.

You see, sadly, to many people it will not be a joyful event, instead it will be the great and terrible day of the Lord because they have been living in denial that Jesus will return and that God will judge humanity. Those who will be unprepared for that day will be those who are saying “peace and safety”, those who are denying the authority of God in the world and in their lives.

And that is tragic and dangerous because God is holy and righteous and we, by our very fallen nature are sinful and rebellious against him.

This is a very real danger to mortal man from our holy God. Now, it is not that God is some sort of terrible despot, or a fascist dictator, or a terrorist leader, in fact God has warned us and he has urged us to be saved. As we shall see, he sent Jesus his son as the very agent of our salvation because he loves us and wants us to be safe and at peace with him and yet there are those who declare there is peace in our time when in fact the storm clouds of God’s just wrath against sin are gathering.

So how is it that we declare peace and safety in such perilous times? First it is by the very denial of God, the claim that there is no danger – “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.”

Do you remember that campaign? It was run by the Humanist society a year or so ago. They paid for adverts with that message on to be put up on the side of buses in London.

You know I heard about one vicar who had a bus stop outside his church, so he paid for a poster to be made and he pasted it on his notice board, it read; “There’s probably no bus. Now stop worrying and come into church.”

There is someone fighting against the dangerous message that there is no God – the dangerous lie of “peace and safety” whilst destruction is coming suddenly.

And then there are those who perhaps believe something about God, but who would rather not regard him as a God who would ever judge anyone; he’s far too nice for that. But that’s like looking at soldiers, airmen, or sailors in their dress uniforms, watching them rescuing flood victims, or dropping essential food and medical aid and saying “they would never go to war, they are far too nice for that.”

It is because they are nice, because they are good, **because** they believe in justice, because they believe in right and wrong that the men and women in our armed forces are prepared to go to war and fight and die so that justice might prevail.

If we don’t believe that God will judge evil and sin in the hearts and lives of everyone then we have turned God into a god who is not good and we are saying “peace and safety” to our friends and families whilst destruction rushes on them suddenly.

So we need to be properly prepared, the return of Jesus and the judgement of God shouldn’t take God’s people by surprise. Paul says, “But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.”

A little while ago we heard the Kohima epitaph, a familiar part of our liturgy, but I wonder if you know anything about Kohima

where the epitaph was written and first inscribed on a memorial to the fallen? The battle of Kohima is actually one which 31 squadron played a vital role and one where the British Army were totally outnumbered. Kohima is on the Burmese/Indian border and it was vital that the British take it if they were to retake Burma and India.

But the Japanese forces, who outnumbered the British by 10 to 1 fought a hard and vicious battle. Day and night the British and Indian troops were subjected to Japanese broadcast appeals for them to surrender. Then the Japanese artillery would become most active at dusk and dawn, shredding the nerves of the soldiers as well as destroying targets.

Finally, when night fell, the Allied troops would listen in the dark, straining to catch the rustle of Japanese infiltrators moving behind them, stoking the fear that when they awoke in the morning the occupants of the next gunpit might be the enemy.

By April 13th 1944 the situation at Kohima was desperate. A message was sent to the 5th Brigade that unless help arrived within 48 hours Kohima would fall: 'The men's spirits are all right but there aren't many of us left....'

The Japanese swarmed everywhere but were unable to mount a co-ordinated attack which would have spelled the end at Kohima. The ground around Garrison Hill - just 350 yards (320m) square - was now all that was left of the perimeter which had been held eight days earlier. But the men of the West Kents hung on until dawn of the 20th when troops of the Royal Berkshires, the advance guards of 2nd Division, broke in to relieve them.

“They hung on until dawn.” Paul urges us to do the same, “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong

to the night or to the darkness.” – Hang on until dawn, don’t give in to the dangers and terrors and temptations of the night.

And Paul goes on with an instruction that would have stood the troops at Kohima in good stead as they strove to avoid being over run by the enemy; “So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.”

But being alert is not enough, we need help as we seek to live out our Christian lives. 31 Squadron was formed in Farnborough in 1915 and throughout its history its aircraft have been fitted with everything from being early bombers during the First World War to having nuclear capability during the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s when the Squadron was based in Germany.

However, 31 Squadron also has a proud history of supporting troops by dropping supplies to them and 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 records vital supplies being dropped to us.

Paul says in verse 8, “...since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” These are God’s protection for us as we await the return of Jesus – faith and love protect our heart from attacks and going astray; the desires of an easy life, the false idols which surround us; be faithful to God and love him with all your heart.

And then the sure hope of salvation protects our mind from doubts and fears – all the attacks of our enemy, the devil; the father of lies.

But as we seek to live our lives for Christ, we remember that God has not just sent us out into the cold harsh reality of the hostile world, badly trained and with inadequate body armour to fend for ourselves, no, God is in the thick of the battle with us.

I believe that 31 Squadron are once more currently serving in Afghanistan. Far from being cut off and aloof from all that goes on on the ground, before they leave for a battle zone the air crews actually undertake training to develop their skills from a ground perspective so that they can better support the troops because they know what they are experiencing.

Paul reminds us that likewise God is not aloof from our conflict, he sent Jesus; God made man, into the world on a mission to rescue those trapped by sin, surrounded by the enemy, facing certain death – that is you and me.

In that desperate situation Jesus did not think to save himself at the expense of those he was with and those yet to come, but in order that we might be rescued from the coming wrath, the just judgement of God against our sin Jesus gave up his own life for us.

Paul spells it out in verses 9 and 10; “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.” In other words, in this context, whether we are alive or dead, we can be confident of our salvation through Christ if we have stood firm in our faith.

As we meet together today and remember those who gave their lives for us we should be encouraged to work together for peace and our Bible reading reminds us that in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection we should “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.”

That we should fix our eyes on that day when “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” because God has finally and powerfully wiped away every tear.

That is the time which will follow the return of Jesus, the time when God makes everything new and when he restores his people and his world to the way he intended us to be; when we will finally be at peace with ourselves and with him.

So, brothers and sisters; this Remembrance Sunday, be thankful for those who have fought and died in order that we might worship the living God freely here and be encouraged that trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, that sharing in the joy of his victory you may “[put] on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as [your] helmet” and commit yourself afresh to stand firm in the heat of battle and finally come before the throne of grace with humility and confidence through the sacrifice of Christ. Amen.