



**Sermon preached by The Very Reverend Christine Wilson
at the Service of Remembrance on 13 November 2016**

Recently I was unpacking my father-in-law's extensive collection of books and I came across one that was published by His Majesty's stationary office in 1941.

The book caught my eye because I have recently moved to Lincoln and it is entitled Bomber Command.

In it there is a description of the qualities required of a bomber pilot.

"They must be capable of considerable physical and mental endurance, for it may be necessary to remain even twelve hours in the air and fly for the most part over hostile territory or acres of unfriendly sea. They will be in the prime of youth and life and death will be a daily reality."

The book describes the dramatic dangers of the freezing temperatures with ice choking the engine causing an airplane to plummet.

Here is another little extract to give you an idea:

Soon after leaving the English coast we ran into rain which was literally tropical in fury. After some time, we climbed and the rain turned to snow. At 13000 feet the engines of two of the Blenheims became iced up and stopped. One of the aircraft dropped more or less out of control until only 600 feet above the sea when they started again. The other was even luckier. It actually struck the waves at the very moment its engines came to life. It lost its rear wheel but both aircraft got safely back to base.

My dad, who is 91, was a radar mechanic based Waddington and then Coningsby from 1943, a young conscript serving with Bomber Command. He celebrated his 18th birthday on the Saturday and arrived at Waddington on the Sunday.

Very recently he told me of evenings at a local pub where they formed a choir and would sing heartily and down pints of ale – high spirited young men finding ways to cope with being away from home and the reality of war. "It was terrible, he said, one night you were comrades cheerfully singing and the next night they were gone. The ones who didn't come back from a raid."

There is a salutary passage in the book about a dangerous raid to destroy bridges at Maastricht.

The crews which manned them were chosen by lot, since everyone had volunteered. They went in low disregarding enemy fighters above and anti-aircraft fire from below. Five of the six were shot down. The sixth crashed on fire on our side of the line and the pilot instructed his crew to jump. Two Victoria crosses were awarded that day.

The average age of air crew in Bomber command was 21.

Losses were high, men grew up fast and died young.

We remember today across the whole of the Armed Forces, servicemen and women who fought and fell in order to secure a future of peace and freedom for us.

It is in that context that we explore the two Bible readings we have this morning.

The Micah reading was written at a time of great turmoil in the history of God's people. The world was fragile, full of uncertainty and terror.

Some things never change!

A prophetic voice speaks into the situation giving a vision of God's everlasting promise to be amongst us, to be committed to us and to deliver us into a world of peace and security where the powerless and the vulnerable are given hope. Where good triumphs over evil.

We are given a picture of a world where the weapons of war and destruction are set aside, no longer needed, swords and spears are turned into farming tools. Fear is taken away and all is peace and bliss.

Given our long and almost perpetual state of war somewhere in the world this can sound like a fantasy, a utopian dream, the stuff of fairy tales, rather than any sort of soon to be realised event.

The reading from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus speaks of how such a world might come into being, seems even more impossible to achieve.

Faced with evil or threat and uncertainty, how do you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you?

Jesus gives us a radical and costly command. The command to love.

To love not just those who are easy to love but to love our enemies. Elsewhere in his teachings he speaks of the rule of love as the greatest commandment and he says "greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

He puts words into practice in his own out pouring of love in the self-sacrifice of his death on the Cross.

I want you to imagine a vast roll of canvas stretching for miles. It has the potential to be a masterpiece of extraordinary beauty and wonder. Much of the painting is red and black, the colours of suffering and darkness. But it also the colour of love and of that which is too mysterious and too unknowable for us to comprehend.

On the canvas there are splashes of gold and white, glimpses of the heroic steps of humankind in pursuit of that vision of a world of harmony and love.

The gold and white of the saints and heroes, of acts of mercy, justice and peace.

It is an unfolding story of deeds of resistance against the power of evil. Extraordinary moments of forgiveness and love against the odds.

In the midst of the canvas is a section of dazzling white, the presence of God with us in his Son Jesus Christ illuminating the forward path to peace and freedom, hope and deliverance. "This is the way walk in it."

The people we remember today contribute to that canvas. To the glorious vision of the world we glimpse in our readings. Their sacrifice is painted upon it. A record of costly self-giving love.

But the picture is unfinished. Ahead is a blank canvas, a vast empty silent space. Full of waiting and hoping and longing.

Just as in the days of Micah the world is fragile, full of uncertainty and terror. It is in following the way of Christ that peace and security are to be found. The paint brush is poised and the choice at this moment in the story is yours and mine. God is anticipating our contribution.

Freewill means that we get to choose our actions. Peace or conflict? Light or darkness? We are invited to make our contribution to that unfinished, not yet fully accomplished vision, of a world of peace on earth and goodwill towards everyone.

The men and women we remember and honour today gave their lives for the sake of the greater good.

We will remember them. And how will we be remembered?

As we remember the impact on families and communities down through the years may it urge us to seek peace, to be agents of that better way: The Way of Love.

Let us make our mark on history - as agents of peace. Amen.