

Truth, Lies and Leadership. A sermon preached on Remembrance Day, November 11, 2018 marking the 100th anniversary of the Armistice of the Great War at St. Giles Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons; ISAIAH 2:1-4

JAMES 4:1-3

MATTHEW 2:14-18

For as long as I can remember, when the 11th of November fell on any day but Sunday, it was compulsory in my family to be in attendance at a Remembrance Day service that ended up at the local cenotaph.

The programme was always the same, But each year there were fewer veterans from the First World War and the veterans from the other conflicts that peppered the last century were older.

In my hometown's marking of this day, the service never changed in terms of its order.

And in fact it was not about the order – it was about remembering and giving thanks for those who went off to fight – many of whom did not return, those who did and those who did return but never completely healed from emotional and physical wounds.

We were marking the end of a war that was supposed to be the end of all wars – though history has shown that was not the case.

Well today marks a century since the end of that War – the Great War of 1914-1918.

And communities this one included will still gather for a service of Remembrance.

The order of the service here for Prince George is not much different than the ones of boyhood Welland, or the other places we have lived.

There will be no WWI veterans present, and considerably fewer WWII veterans than when I was growing up.

There will also be what not the case was when I was growing up-- a number of younger veterans and their families from conflicts that have erupted after the end of the Second World War, and are still raging today.

November 11th does not regularly fall on a Sunday – the last time was in 2012.

But this November 11th is especially significant as it marks the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice which was supposed to end all war.

Historians will tell you that the Armistice was so ham fistedly handled that it created the stage for another war within a generation.

As this is the 100th anniversary of the end of the Great War – I do not think it can be ignored in a church service – nor should it be.

Its effects changed the world in which we live, Impacted millions of people and generations after.

From my perspective though there are at least two dilemmas.

One professional and one personal.

The professional one is an ongoing dilemma – how much of what is essentially a civic service should be part of a worship service.

That dilemma dates back to the establishment of community Remembrance Day services in Westminster Abbey in 1920 with the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

when communities came together to express a collective grief over the loss of nearly a generation of young men,

And to mark the heroism, gallantry and self-sacrifice of so many – *“greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for his friends (Jn 15:13).*

Over the years I have seen more than one ministry either end or come close to it, by saying too much or too little on Remembrance Day Sunday.

One congregation I served had a lot of Americans who had come north to Canada owing to the war in Vietnam. They could not have cared less about

marking Armistice Day and were quite uneasy about even Remembrance Day prayers.

In another congregation, we had the full Monty as it were – flags, trumpet and a full dress uniform retired Sgt, Major barking orders to children about how and where to place wreaths at the front of the church.

Only thing missing were the Lee Enfields at the front display – and even they could have been there had I not said no thank you to the one who wanted to donate them to the church for the day.

That made more than one person uncomfortable. Two extremes then on how congregations mark the day.

The complete melding of what is in essence a civic occasion into a service of public worship is often like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

That is the first dilemma – what form and how much.

The second dilemma is a more personal one this morning.

Before I entered theological training I had a master's degree in history – with one of the areas of specialization being the First World War.

That specialization grew out of an interest and fascination that began when I was in my early teens and continues to this day.

So I know a lot of history about this war. And I could present to you a talk on some social or historical topic related to this war – war art, war poetry, war music, trench warfare, the effects of the war on the home front, military tactics and strategies, personalities in the war – from the generals to the political leaders to the people who fought in the trenches – complete with audio visuals

And I think you would find it interesting and informative

But that is not why you and I are here this morning is it?

Yes, it is November 11th

Yes, it is the day that marks the 100th anniversary of the end of the Great War

But I do not think you are here and I know I am certainly not here to give a public lecture on some part of World War I history

We are here to worship God

And that is where we must remain anchored – in the eternal reality of the living God.

Now while the Bible talks about war and speaks bluntly about its effects on the soldiers as well as the general population,

The wars it describes happened a long time ago.

And remember the bulk of the New Testament was written during a time of Roman military occupation.

The Romans were not known as gentle occupiers of countries.

Yet, while we will not find, nor should we try to seek out in the scriptures exact comparisons or reminders about the First World War or any modern war for that matter.

I think there are a number of overall concepts or ideas that still ring true today about war's causes — any war

That we would do well to heed.

Consider the lesson that Jessica read from James' letter

You may remember when we looked at this letter from James a few years back what stood out was James' no nonsense counsel.

It is blunt

It is forceful

His words are frighteningly strong

Those opening verses from chapter 4 are no exception.

Let me read what Jessica read, but from Eugene Peterson's the Message

4¹⁻² Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves. You lust for what you don't have and are willing to

kill to get it. You want what isn't yours and will risk violence to get your hands on it.

²⁻³ You wouldn't think of just asking God for it, would you? And why not? Because you know you'd be asking for what you have no right to. You're spoiled children, each wanting your own way.

There is no other way you can hear these words but in a tone of earnest and concerned counsel from James--

Cut the rhetoric,

Cut the padding,

And cut the rationalization and self-justification.

Conflicts and disputes do not just happen

Their root cause – our cravings, our covetousness, our sense of entitlement, our fears and anxieties from not having our own way.

Some commentators on these verses say James did not mean actual killings – he is just using the language of war metaphorically.

Really!

I think that is like saying of the teachings of Jesus we do not particularly agree with or like – Our Lord was just having a bad day – he really did not mean what he said.

Ohhh – Jesus always meant what he said.

He had no time for puffed up speech or verbal fluff
No time for flummery.

Same thing then with James – strong language underlines how serious James takes the cravings, the conflicts and the disputes.

Unmonitored and/or uncorrected cravings, disputes and conflicts within us can result in witches' brew of toxicity and corrosiveness in our relationships with all others and within ourselves....

Add to this,

Mistruths, untruths and bald faced lies which this witch's brew cooks up and we have problems – big problems.

Case in point-the origins of the First World War and its sustaining power to fight and kill

Match to the tinder box was of course the assassination of Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo.

But through a series of alliances and ententes of the 1890's and 1900's the world's powers found themselves in a position that they never expected to be.

Though I look at all of this with hindsight as do all of us – I cannot help but wonder what would have happened if the German government was less aggressive in its fear of not having what the other great powers had – colonies

If the German fear had been dialed down so that their military plan of moving through Belgium

quickly and often brutally had been put into place as quickly as it was.

In other words, I wonder what would have happened if cooler and more rational heads had prevailed from 1910-1914

If cooler and more rational heads had prevailed by the end of 1914

Sadly and tragically that did not happen.

Political and military, as well as media spin doctors were already at work before August 1914 painting the other side as the enemy, them, those people not like us

And, as the First World War took place in a world in which religious faith was still the norm,

It was not long before the opposing side was not just the enemy, but apostate, evil and a worldly representative of Satan.

Throw into this the propaganda posters and stories of violence and atrocities done to non-combatants – women, children and the elderly and one ratchets up the level of disgust and pure hatred of the enemy.

In 2004, American historian, Philip Knightly wrote a book about the history of war journalism. It was called the First Casualty. The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth Maker from the Crimea to Iraq.

The title is taken from a statement made by an American Senator, one Hiram Johnson in 1917, *The first casualty when war comes, is truth.*

That is certainly one of the effects of unmonitored or uncorrected disputes in our lives isn't it?

Sensible and rational speech disappears in conflict disputes and cravings.

All we see is our point of view

If you are not for us – then you're agin us!!!

Over and again you see this happening from the tongues of rational people.

Thomas Eakin was minister of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Toronto – a Scottish baronial design of a church still on the corner of King and Simcoe Streets in Toronto.

In 1914, St. Andrew's was not a large congregation in terms of members, but it was a very influential because many of its members were important leaders of commerce, business and at the University of Toronto.

His collected sermon from 1914-1918 give us a sense of what he preached.

In 1914-mid 1915 he urged peace and reconciliation
In April 1916 and to the end of the war, Eakin spoke many times about the war as a sacred cause
It was the only way civilization could be preserved from the forces of savagery.

I cannot read German, but the materials I have that are translated into English make the same claim—God is on our side. Belt buckles on the German soldiers had the words *Gott mitte uns* The Allied naval blockade is reflective of the barbarian nature of the allies. For they are causing people to starve in Germany. Both sides Christianized the war to their own advantage—a crucified Christ was on the side of the just—and both sides claimed they were the side of the just.

The posters I have on file play fast and loose with the truth to increase the hatred one has of the enemy, the them.

That was then,

Here we are 100 years on.

We cannot alter what happened, but I believe each of us—each of us has a responsibility to work toward a time when there will be no more war.

The time Isaiah speaks about in the Old Testament lesson read this morning

**...they shall beat their swords into
ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against
nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.**

A vain hope you say,

An unrealistic pipe dream.

No...for God's people are called to live in the light that our God is the God of the impossible.

We do though have to do our part so to speak. James has told us what causes conflicts, disputes and wars among us.

To address what can become a warring madness,
We need above all to begin with ourselves

You remember Jesus so appropriate counsel

Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's^[a] eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your neighbour,^[b] "Let me take the speck out of your eye", while the log is in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's^[c] eye. (Matthew 7:3-5)

Keep watch over our own thought life

That is where the cravings begin

That is where the covetousness begins

That is where the sense of entitlement, bigotry, racism, and demonization of others not like us begins.

I am not responsible for President Trump's bombast and lying.

But what I found very troubling this past week before and after the mid term election is that his supporters see nothing wrong with a leader who bases his opinions and speech, not on truths and research, but on his own experience and perception of the wider world – which is very narrow.

Keep informed and educated – big picture – long view.

The internet is now with us – like it or not.

And while it can be immensely helpful, it is also an information source that is anything but flawless and true all the time.

There is a lot of good on the Web, but there is also a lot of hate, disguised as good and beneficial.

I think another important aspect of Remembrance Day – be it a Sunday or a week day – is to lift up lives that made a difference during what were incredibly difficult times.

Lives that tried to live out and model the Christian life in a time and place that was anything but Christian.

This morning, let me just briefly mention three individuals – chaplains actually

Two were in active service during WWI

One was on active service during WWII

Two were Church of England chaplain

One was a Canadian Presbyterian

Chaplain George Scott defied orders on several occasions that his place was not in the front line trenches it was behind the front lines leading church services for the men.

Scott led church services behind the lines, but more often than not, he was with the men in the front line trenches as they prepared to engage in battle.

For Scott believed the men needed God there, a chaplain to listen, to pray for them and with them in the trenches

And many times Scott stayed in the trenches until the men came back or new men came up from the back trenches. Talk about self-sacrifice.

Philip "Tubby" Clayton--another Church of England chaplain--was one of the first to recognize the effects of shell shock or what we know today as PTSD.

Clayton came to realize that men refused to go into battle or ran away from it, not because they lacked courage, but because their bodies could no longer stand the vibrations of the constant shelling and the horrors they saw every day on the battlefield.

To combat this, Clayton set up a Christian rest and recreation centre for soldiers in the unoccupied town of Poperinge in Flanders. *Christian compassion* Here, with no restrictions owing to rank, the soldiers would gather for dinner, religious services, conversation, music, art -- in fact anything that would take their minds off the war

The house was called Talbot House – shortened to Toc H.

The Toc H movement still continues today at various centres around the UK and around the world. And they remain places of Christian fellowship and sanctuary,

World War II – the ill-fated Dieppe landing. John Foote, chaplain of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry attached himself that morning of the landing to the Regimental Aid Post.

Foote spent the day crisscrossing the beach under heavy fire to help carry the wounded from the open beach to the landing craft for retreat.

Foote's chief concern was for the care and evacuation of the wounded.

His own safety was secondary

Over and again, he refused opportunities and direct orders to leave the beach

Instead he chose to stay with the men and along with them was interned in a POW camp for the remainder of the war. Another example of Christ like self-sacrifice.

We are now a century in both time and space from the 1914-18 war.

The last veteran of that war died some years ago. To travel the area where the worst fighting took place,

Is no longer the moonscape it was in 1918.

There are high speed highways, green fields and industrial plants.

But the remembrances of that war are still there – in cemeteries like Tyne Cot, Beaumont Hamel and Thiepval.

In place names like St. Julien, Poperinge, and Vimy. And in the diaries and often nameless individuals who stare back at us from cracked and sepia coloured photos.

On this or any Reembrance Day, certainly we are called to remember – and rightly so.

But I suggest we are also called and challenged to live each day of our lives sensitive to how easily unmonitored or uncorrected conflicts, disputes, cravings can develop into something very dangerous.

We have all heard what the 4th chapter of James letter says.

The call and the challenge are not to forget it – ever!!