



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, November 10, 2019
Remembrance Sunday

Choral Evensong
at 4:00 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Micah 4:1-5 and Matthew 5:1-12
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Remembrance Sunday, 2019 Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the D-Day Landings

Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, Sword. The names given to the landing beaches in Normandy, France, on June 6, 75 years ago. Hitler had made a miscalculation and had assumed that any invasion would happen near Calais but, in spite of that, the coast of Normandy was still heavily guarded and those who boarded the landing craft knew that many of them would not even reach the beach once the ramp had been dropped. It is not known how many actually died on D-day but it is estimated that there were over 4,400 Allied deaths that day including 2,500 Americans. Poignantly, there are historians still trying to account for those missing.

D-day was, of course, the beginning of the end of Nazi-occupied Europe and the loss of life, though hard to comprehend, was ultimately not in vain. Those who made the supreme sacrifice did so for peace and justice. Remembrance Sunday is an important day in Europe and, although in the US November 11 is Veterans Day and Memorial Day is the day to remember our war dead, this Church continues the tradition of remembrance on the Sunday closest to Armistice Day.

I grew up in the 1960s with the memory of the Second World War still very fresh; as was common with most of my peers at school, our parents were older – they had seen active service in the war and many had married in their 40s. My home town still had a great deal of bomb damage being repaired and rationing had only ended six years before my birth. The stories of the war filled many an evening and especially when the family gathered and remembered those who had not come back.

The stories of bravery from the D-day landings are many. Some of the soldiers were only teenagers and, yet, put the safety of their comrades first.

One such story is of Waverly B. Woodson, Jr. who arrived at Omaha Beach just as an artillery shell exploded on his landing craft, killing the person next to him and creating terrible wounds through shrapnel. Woodson was a medic and, more significantly, a member of the only African-American combat unit that landed that fateful day. Injured from the shrapnel, he set up a medical station and cared for wounded and dying soldiers for the next 30 hours – himself removing bullets, dispensing blood plasma, cleaning wounds, resetting broken bones, and at one point amputating a foot. He also saved four men from drowning, reportedly pulling them from the waves and administering CPR after their guide rope broke on the way ashore. He treated 200 of his fellow soldiers before collapsing from his own injuries.

Newspapers in the USA declared Woodson a hero, his Commanding Officer commended his bravery and General Eisenhower praised his particular unit. And yet, he never received the Medal of Honor – the highest US military decoration. In fact, it is shocking to read that of the hundreds of Medals of Honor distributed after the war, not one was awarded to a black soldier in spite of 1 million African-Americans serving their country. It was not until the 1990's that the US Army held an investigation into racial discrimination and awarded medals to black soldiers, most of them posthumously.

From the prophecy of Micah, *"In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say:*

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

On this Remembrance Sunday, we gather to pay our respects, to remember, and to make a commitment for peace.

We remember the bravery of people like Waverly Woodson but also the unsung heroes whose bodies were never recovered and whose names are a distant memory. We remember those who have continued to fight for peace and justice and to challenge aggression, bullying, dictating, and discrimination.

Here in this place, not far from the United Nations, we say of our war dead, "We will remember them." We remember them not because we want to glorify war or conflict but because they believed in peace and justice. Micah gives us the reason why we keep Remembrance Sunday in this place – hope. Hope for a new world where God will be the center of things and not human aggrandizement. *"They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid."* Fear is a terrible thing and war brings fear and uncertainty; think of the fear of the civilians caught up in the Second World War; think of the fear of those who were incarcerated in the extermination camps. A new world-order is needed where fear is banished.

That new world order is not some pie-in-the-sky dream. It is not a political manifesto. It has little to do with elections or, dare I say it, things like "Brexit". (It is, though, ironic that Britain is pulling out of the European Union when my father and his generation fought for it.) Yesterday, we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall – a sign of reunion and hope. But this new world order that the bible speaks of is **God's plan** for his creation as it comes to fulfilment and not just ours. Jesus came to usher in that plan and God's manifesto – the antithesis of humankind's abuse of power – and we heard them in our second lesson today, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes of Jesus seem contrary to what we think is logical or taught as important virtues: How can you be blessed if you are poor; or mourning the loss of a loved one; or if you are persecuted. Mercy may be okay but people should get what's coming to them, shouldn't they? And meekness will never get you anywhere in the corporate world, will it? Of course, the Beatitudes of the Kingdom are not as simple as that – they are a reminder of the centrality of God in our lives who must be the focus of all that we do.

Archbishop Rowan Williams once suggested that in order to understand the power of the Beatitudes, then we have to look back to the narrative that precedes the sermon on the mount – to chapter four of Matthew's Gospel and the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Williams suggests that it is the third and most terrible temptation is the most compelling as we try to understanding what Jesus means by Blessedness. This third temptation also takes place on a mountain, but not just any mountain; Matthew says that it was a very high mountain. From there, the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth in their splendor and offered that splendor to him in exchange for falling down and worshipping him. The response of Jesus is the key to our understanding of the beatitudes – on *that* mountain, Jesus did not choose a relationship with

human power and self-aggrandizement; instead he chose the perfect relationship that he already had with his Father and which relationship he would share with his friends. *“Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”* (Matthew 4:10)

The beatitudes are not a blue-print for church life, neither are they a stoic way of dealing with disappointment. The beatitudes are the values of the Kingdom and the making visible of that Kingdom here on earth. As Rowan Williams has said: *“It all moves towards that tremendous vision of the visibility of the Kingdom in the lives of believers. Light - the light shining before the world so that people will give glory to the Father.”*¹

There was much darkness on the landing-beaches of Normandy 75 years ago. But that darkness had been brought about by sinful and evil men who tried to dominate the world and snuff out any who were opposed to them. In the end, justice prevailed; truth was the order of the day; and those who paid the supreme sacrifice glimpsed the light of God.

Let me end with the words of King George VI from his Christmas message of 1939 to the British Empire in which he quotes the beautiful poem by Minnie Haskins, “God knows.” He said this to a country, to an Empire, and to a Europe gripped with fear:

“I feel that we may all find a message of encouragement in the lines which, in my closing words, I would like to say to you: I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’ And he replied, Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way.”

King George then ended his speech with some simple words that are at the heart of all efforts for a better world and for making peace; words at the heart of our two readings today; and words that will help us on this Remembrance Sunday:

He said,
“May that Almighty Hand guide and uphold us all.”

¹. Bible study given to a conference in Wales, August 31, 2000.