

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 13, 2022

Remembrance Sunday

Choral Evensong with an Act of Remembrance

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Micah 4:1-5

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Changing Swords into Plowshares

As you came to church today, you may have noticed the holiday lights and Christmas decorations beginning to fill the shops on and around 5th Avenue. Thanksgiving Day is round the corner and, in just over two weeks, the Rockefeller Christmas Tree will become the focus for people's attention. Round the corner from where the tree will be placed, there is a small and exquisite gilded sculpture on one of the Rockefeller Plaza buildings. It is so easy to miss it because it is a bible reference caved in the stone – the word *Isaiah* and, in Roman numerals, the numbers two and four. Next to it is a carving of a plowshare and two swords disappearing into it. It is a depiction of the same words that we heard earlier in our service from the prophecy of Micah: *"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 any more."*

If you have seen the images of the liberation of Kherson in Ukraine over the past couple of days, then those words will be very poignant. I grew up in a family that had experienced the Second World War in Europe – my father served in the Royal Air Force; several of my uncles served in the Navy and the Army; one was killed, and another was a prisoner of war in the Far East. The images of soldiers being greeted by tears of joy and spontaneous singing was extraordinary. The fact that the city had no power, or water, or internet was shocking; how can we be still allowing this to happen in the second decade of the 21st century?

Remembrance Sunday, Armistice Day in Europe, and Veteran's Day here in the United States come within the month of November – the month when we pray for the dead. There is an old hymn that is still sometimes sung in England that compares the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to that of a soldier on the battlefield. Perhaps this came about because of the words of Jesus from John's Gospel, *"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."* (John 15:13) – a verse found on many European war memorials. While the sentiments are pious, the theology is, of course, not quite right. Jesus was not a soldier in battle and his death was not for any just cause. Jesus gave up his life for *all* humanity. Jesus went on to say, *"You are my friends if you do what I command you."* And what is that commandment? To **'love one another as I have loved you.'**

Love, not war, is the legacy of Jesus Christ.

On this Remembrance Sunday, we remember the men and women who made the supreme sacrifice for their country, for their fellow men and women and, more importantly, for the cause of peace and justice. As we gather in this church, the people of Ukraine are still fighting to retain their independence; the military crack-down in Burma-Myanmar is reversing the advances in democracy in revert years; armed forces around the world are on high alert; some dictators are testing the delivery systems for weapons of mass destruction; and

many of the world's poor are even more hungry because of a shortage of grain shipments. The words of the prophets seem to ring hollow; when will we be able to turn our weapons into agricultural implements?

When I went to University in 1978, Liberation Theology was becoming very important; systematic and biblical theologians turned to issues such as just war, wealth and poverty, power and control, prejudice and injustice. My own Divinity school was hardly known for its radical views and more for being the only school left in Britain that insisted its students take not one, but two final exams in New Testament Greek, but the faculty were worried about nuclear war and they invited Professor Dorothy Sölle, who was at that time teaching at the Union Theological Seminary here in New York, to come and talk to us about nuclear disarmament and the Christian tradition of just war.

She focused on the consequences of the arms race and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Her words have stayed with me ever since as she spoke about the theory of nuclear deterrent and its appropriate acronym MAD (mutually assured destruction) as the justification for stockpiling weapons. *"The bombs are falling already,"* she said, and then she led us in a little bible study of Mark 14, where we read that in Bethany, just before his betrayal, Jesus was anointed with costly perfume and people grumbled because of the waste of money. Jesus responded to this by saying, *"You always have the poor with you; you will not always have me."* (Mark 14:7). Sölle repeated the phrase 'you always have the poor with you.' And then she paused and she looked around the room and said, *"Jesus did not say you always have the hungry with you. The bombs are falling already,"* she repeated, *"because of famine, starvation, and lack of clean water are things that can be prevented but we choose to spend money on weapons of mass destruction"*

In a few moments we will make an act of remembrance of our war dead. In so doing, we will remember the futility of war and the needless loss of life. As we remember our war dead, that memory should inspire us *not* to give up the cause for which they died – the seeking of peace and justice. Just as the historical and patriotic societies present here today keep alive the history of the past, so our act of remembrance should make a difference to the present. How do we care for our veterans, many of whom are sadly homeless on the streets of our city? How do we care for those whose lives have been changed forever because of the consequences of war and terrorism? How do we welcome displaced persons who are desperate for a home? Do we pray for the brave members of our armed forces who, even today, may be asked to make that supreme sacrifice for you and for me in the cause of freedom?

May he, who is the Prince of Peace, help us in this struggle and in our acts of remembrance. May we live in hope so that, like St. Paul, we can say to one another, *"I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*