REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY NOVEMBER 2016

Readings: Micah 4: 1-5 Philippians 4: 6-9

Women of Spirit – Abigail (1 Samuel 25)

On this day, 100 years ago, the last major military operation began in the four month long Battle of the Somme. It began, as had the Somme offensive on the 1 July, with another mine detonated beneath the Hawthorn Ridge Rebout. One week later on the 18 November, with minor tactical gains, a lull descended on the front, as both sides, exhausted, settled down for a harsh winter.

During those 141 days over one million were killed or wounded and with them the 19th century dream of human progress lay mortally wounded. It would take another global conflict on the back of a flawed peace, economic collapse and white imperial legitimacy, before humankind could begin to conceive of ways and structures in which the words of Micah could be even a faint hope.

“nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more;”
Micah 4:3

Carved on a plaque at the entrance to the ruins of Coventry Cathedral, they express the hopes of generations in the twentieth century scarred by the trauma of global conflicts on an industrial scale, whose cost in lives, loves, aspirations we remember and mourn today.

What followed was a cold war of relative stability and peace in the global north, while in the global south its protagonists exploited regional and ideological conflicts in the struggle of nation building in a post-colonial era. A moment of hope as the iron curtains and concrete walls came down. Then a growing realisation in our times that the humiliations and hurts of the past, compounded by the injustices and inequalities of the present, have unleashed an anger and violence which we struggle to contain, let alone understand.

It would be easy to conclude that violent conflict in the affairs of nations and in the interactions of people is the inescapable nemesis of the human predicament. More than ever, through television and social media, millions of us are drawn into the trauma of the countless others who we view covered in rubble and blood, or know are under that puff of dust cloud we see emanating from the explosion of a bomb from the latest drone or shell. If you so desired, you can have a visual ring side seat of the battle of Mosul or the siege of Aleppo on the 24/7 TV news stream on the small electronic device we carry in our pockets.

In a world consumed with and consuming war, and living in fear with the rumours of war, where is hope? There is hope in the vision of the Prophet Micah – just rulers, equitable arbitration, economic renewal - as the weapons of war become the tools of provision and flourishing for all. Shelter and provision sufficient for each. And fear no longer stalks the land – no one shall make them afraid.

Rarely does there seem to be a week this year when preachers have had to revisit their sermon preparation in response to events. This week is no exception. Whether you experience the change of era as the tectonic plates of our human cultures shift, with dread or expectation, the underlying uncertainty and threat is evident for us all.

Fear not. God is with us – the great cry of Christian hope. And it is the God of peace who will be with us. This is a mystery, Christ in us, the hope of glory; yet it is also to be nurtured in thought and practice. How we think and what we do are the essential responsibilities on our part if we are to flourish in the presence of the God of peace who is with us.

Canon David W Porter
“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me and the God of peace will be with you.” Philippians 4:8

The theme this term at King’s College Chapel, Women of Spirit, is profoundly apt on Remembrance Sunday. The impact of war on women and the contribution to peacebuilding of women, needs given greater attention. I want to do it through the story of one woman – Abigail.

We are introduced to her in a story in the bible, an incident in the life of David before he became King. (while we haven’t read it, it is on the sheets given to you to follow along). And what an introduction.

“And what a contrast! While no doubt a somewhat prejudicial judgement by the editorial team, given the future role of Queen Abigail in the story, she was clearly a remarkable woman. What is interesting is how this verse sets two things in contrast for these characters, before a story of conflict and the threat of violent is told. Character and gender.

I need to be clear that this was a story I told the dean I would use when accepting his invite back in April! So responsibility for any relevance to recent events rests elsewhere.

Who we are as people and how we have been formed is the touchstone of how we respond to conflict in our personal lives. Who are leaders are a people – in local communities, in churches, in organisations, in nations – shapes how they respond to or indeed initiate conflict. The personal is political, who we are is how we relate to others and this is no more tested when there is a clash of interest, identity or power.

The conflict that emerges between David and her husband Nabal reflects the character we have been introduced to, and the flawed character of David also. Arrogance that dismisses the needs of others. Offence given and the pride that takes it. Hurt nurtured. Vengence quickly sought. Read the story again this afternoon.

Two men in a stand off. Blood about to be spilt. Into the gap steps a woman. And it is Abigail who knows what Nabals arrogance and David’s pride will cost her. For in the cultural power disparity of gender, she will lose. No one left to provide – no rights except at the hands of the conquering man.

Power is significant here – for it is also one of the young men who step forward – a servant, a bonded slave? David was determined to slaughter all males in Nabal’s household and in the process some of his own would perish. These young men were to be spent and spill blood fro the sake of the pretence and false honour of the powerful.

The hard work of making peace always falls on those with most to lose and those who are the least, those perceived to be without power. With an eye to cultural sensitivity – expressing honour to David in place of disrespect, discretion so as not to antagonise Nabal, Abigail acts to mediate.
Humbly, with grace and with a self-assured awareness she stands in the soon to be blood filled breech between the two. She assuages wrath. Takes on the guilt of the offender. Speaks truth to power. For David’s resort to violence wold be a blight on his conscience. He would be shedding blood without cause.

It would be good to say the story had a good ending. Nabal’s character was such that he could not appreciate what his wife had done for him. The editors attribute his affliction and subsequent death to God in a way that is deeply disturbing. Did God actively strike Nabal down? Is David expressing his arrogance and pride when attributing God’s agency in response to a cultural insult? His friendly propaganda editors providing the gloss.

Maybe God simply used Abigail to hold David back from evil, and Nabal simply succumbed to the effects of his own inner being and lifestyle on his body in a situation of extreme stress. Good sermons are meant to leave us with questions. I leave you to ponder.

Abigail – clever and beautiful – was a women of spirit. A mediator. Someone who helped avert the spilling of innocent blood. Today there are countless Abigail around the world – women of spirit who take a stand for peace and who make peace. Who speak up for justice, bear witness to the slaughter. Often at great cost to themselves as sexual violence is used to intimidate and dehumanise in wars around the global.

In the words of the Liberian women who came together to end a bloody civil war, by their actions they pray the devil back to hell.

As we remember the young men who die fighting our wars, let us stand with the women who give them birth. With all the powerless and exploited who bear the full costs of war. Let us too beat our weapons into ploughshares. The weapons of our flawed character – the pride, the arrogance, pride, vengefulness that is quick to anger and slash out. To walk among the peoples as those who walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever. Amen.