

It's been very difficult to work out what to say today. Three years ago I preached here for Remembrance Sunday, but not from this pulpit and in very different circumstances. The second lockdown had just started, and we zoomed the service from the Lady Chapel. We had the same readings, and I took my theme from the Gospel and talked about wisdom.

It seems strangely right to think about that again today. Wisdom comes from experience – from careful consideration of events and information, and by definition it is useful. It can be applied in present or future situations to interpret, understand and respond appropriately. And three years on we have moved from unknowns of lockdown to the first phase of the Covid enquiry from which, it is to be hoped, wisdom will emerge that will enable us to be better prepared to address a similar situation if (probably when) it occurs at some time in the future.

This may be an unexpected introduction to a day when the theme is remembrance. But what the witnesses at the enquiry are required to do is to remember – to cast their minds back and deliver, from their particular perspective, a coherent narrative of events as they unfolded. Everyone's perspective will be different, of course. We are hearing some pretty alarming revelations and reacting to them with the benefit of hindsight, always a wonderful attribute. Heaven forbid that we should ever find ourselves directly responsible for managing a crisis of that magnitude, But it is worth asking ourselves whether, in a rapidly-developing dangerous situation, provided with limited and often contradictory information and having to juggle multiple priorities, we could have performed any better. True wisdom will be for the remembering to be used to extract the lessons which will enable whoever is in government and leading our national institutions to plan more effectively to manage the next emergency – and not to make the fatal mistake of meticulously re-planning the last one.

I have just come back from a country which apparently didn't have a single case of Covid. If you persist in asking, they will concede that yes, there was a slightly higher death toll for a while a couple of years ago, but it turned out to be a sort of pneumonia and was 'just one of those things'. A country where you can only have a white car. A country which is probably the only one in the world in which mobile internet access is completely blocked, but their kind president has set up a benign national internet to protect the people from harmful influences. A country where our local guide would speak freely to us on the tour bus, but was looking around nervously whenever we were all out in the open. We were privileged visitors, but it felt very uncomfortable.

This made me realise that our remembrance theme highlights something very important. We are having an open public enquiry into Covid, the results of which will be published and available to everyone. Yesterday 300,000 people marched through central London, almost entirely without incident. Our police force was able to resist demands from very high places for the march to be banned. Sometime next year we will have an election. Not only will anyone be able to stand (they don't have to be a member of an 'approved' political party), but each of us will be free to vote for whichever candidate we choose – or not to vote at all. I can stand here and say these things and many others without the slightest risk that one of you will denounce me to the authorities, or that I will be arrested and imprisoned, or just 'disappeared'.

These are freedoms that we take for granted, as we do our freedoms to live, work and worship in whatever way we choose, only provided that we respect the freedom of other to do likewise. The people we remember today – those whose names we shall read later and those many others whose names are on war memorials all over the country – fought and died for us to have the freedom we enjoy today. We tend not

to think carefully about what that really means. There are indeed many aspects of life in Britain which fall short of the standards we proclaim, and it is our duty as Christians to do whatever we can to improve them. But there is so much that could be infinitely worse. Our annual Remembrance Sunday observances take place with flags and martial music, public ceremonies and parades in which our armed forces feature prominently. It's right that we remember the dedication and self-sacrifice of our servicemen and women in this way, as well as that of the many civilians involved in war, whether inadvertently or of their own volition. But yesterday, 11th November, was Armistice Day, and 'armistice' means the end of hostilities – an end to war and aggression, to violent death, life-changing injuries, and devastated families and communities.

The world suddenly feels a much more dangerous place than it did a few weeks ago. Wisdom requires that we learn from the sacrifice of two world wars, to prevent the continuation and escalation of the conflicts that are raging today. Wisdom requires our leaders must find means of intervention to bring fighting to an end and resolve the underlying issues. Wisdom remembers the tragedies of past wars, observes the developing horrors of today, and demands an end. Our most heartfelt, fervent, repeated prayer must be: 'God, give peace'.