

I first preached on Remembrance Sunday in 2005 and have done so at least half a dozen times since then. It's always been a difficult sermon, because I do not remember – at least, not in the way that was originally intended. I'm at the top of my 'family tree' – no-one in the family now has any direct experience of war. We have some medals and some old photographs – that's all. But each time I have preached I have done so in the knowledge that, because of the sacrifices made by so many people long ago, we in Europe have been free from war for almost eighty years. Service in the armed forces is now voluntary; those who join up spend much time engaged in peace-keeping, humanitarian and disaster-relief activities. We civilians are free from any accidental or deliberate exposure to the consequences of conflict. I'm not so naïve as to believe that there could never be another European war, but I was beginning to think 'not in my lifetime', and to feel that my family was safe too.

But six months ago Russia invaded Ukraine, following its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Suddenly there is war in every news bulletin. Suddenly there are European war refugees in Britain. Suddenly, according to defence experts, 'Europe is closer to war than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962'. Suddenly a mistake, misjudgement or misunderstanding could move us from supporting Ukraine from the sidelines with arms and encouragement to committing British troops to the fighting and – potentially – putting our civilian population at risk of attack. Suddenly this Remembrance Sunday feels very different.

'Lest we forget' is inscribed on war memorials up and down the country. Lest we forget those whose names are listed. But also lest we forget the physically and psychologically damaged survivors, the bomb damage, the power cuts, water shortages, transport disruption and food rationing, the evacuees and the displaced persons of the two great wars. Lest we forget the dread when the telegram boy appeared in the street – something still known, in slightly different form, to the families of servicemen and women today. In that first sermon in 2005 I said that the more we forget what war is like, the further we get from direct experience of it, the more we allow it to be glorified and romanticised, the more risk there is that it will happen again. So while we watch the TV series about the formation of the SAS, in which the desert war is presented as a glorious booze and pill-fuelled adventure with a few bits of existential angst thrown in, people in Ukraine are hiding in the dark in cellars, clearing bomb damage, queuing at standpipes and dying on their front line. 'Lest we forget' is not, and cannot be, a pious sentiment for them. It will be years before forgetting even becomes a possibility.

Our world is desperately in need of peace. We have been lucky, but there has been war somewhere in the world every year since I was born. There have been deaths and injuries, destruction, displaced people and devastated lives and landscapes. Vast amounts of money and resources are dedicated to defence – think what could be done if this were not needed. Yet I am proud of our support for Ukraine, and I would like to be proud of our support for others fleeing from war-torn countries further afield. I would like Britain to be a country and a society to which people come because we are welcoming and compassionate, because (as the prophet Micah says) we do justly and love mercy, because this is a place where no-one need be afraid. 'Laying down your life for your friends' need not mean literal death. It can mean having the courage to let go of your own wealth and privilege for the benefit of others. It can be as straightforward as accepting necessary changes to our lifestyle so that we do not endanger the lives of people far away whom we may never encounter.

Our world is desperately in need of peace, which is not just the absence of war. Peace is mutual respect and comfortable co-existence. Peace is temperate speech, generosity and co-operation. Peace is shared knowledge, shared concern and shared celebration. Peace is the atmosphere within which long-term plans can be made and brought to fruition; peace creates and conserves, innovates and consolidates, explores and evaluates. Peace is the context in which we can set about the task of building God's kingdom here on earth.

It's so easy for hatred, greed, arrogance, jealousy or self-righteousness to get in the way. One fanatic can derail the lives and efforts of millions of peaceful people. Peace is precious and fragile, always at risk. Herculean efforts may be needed to restore it once it has been lost. Our predecessors here at St Peter's, who furnished and decorated our chapel so beautifully in memory of the sons they had lost, knew the price of peace. They hoped that they and all the others whose lives were permanently changed by the war had paid it in full. That second memorial tablet on the wall is evidence that they had not, and that others were still to suffer. Lest we forget and repeat their experience, we can best honour their memory by committing ourselves to peace, justice, mercy, and unstinting love and support for all who truly need it, whoever they are and wherever they come from.