Sunday 14th November 2021   **Liverpool Parish Church**
2 before Advent/Remembrance (B)

OT: **Daniel 12.1-3**
NT: **Hebrews 10.11-14, 19-25**
G: **Mark 13.1-8**

I suspect many of us here have seen *The Lord of the Rings*, that rather stunning trilogy of films which Hollywood-ized the books. They are all good fun, but if you watch them you will be struck by the number of times the characters say to each other, "we live in dark times". I don't know if the filmmakers were trying to make a broader point in this comment on a war-torn mythical world. We do indeed live in dark times: within the last few years thousands of British troops have served and are serving alongside those of other nations across the world. Since 2001 there has been permanent attention on the Middle East, but before then the attention was on other places of conflict, including, of course, Northern Ireland where the troubles lasted for decades.

The churches have not been silent on the current conflicts. Certainly back in 2003 both the then Archbishop of Canterbury and Pope John Paul II led the voices of opposition to conflict. And even if these voices fell on deaf ears at the time, the course of history has probably shown them to be right in much that they said. As Christians we need to reflect on what is done in our name by our elected leaders, and we must pray for peace. If we are at war then we must also pray for all those involved, in the hope that loss of life is always minimal and that when peace comes it is lasting.

There is, of course, an inevitability about war. Our Gospel reading today is sometimes called the 'mini-apocalypse' in the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel said this: "When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to

come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." And this is not just a prophecy about what is about to happen when the end is coming, it is a general prophecy about what life is like before the heavenly kingdom is achieved. We are part of a fallen humanity, a humanity which has turned away from God. Because of this we live in ways which are against God's will, and we turn from love towards conflict.

However, we must pray for peace because Christians can have no other reaction in these circumstances. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt 5.9), said Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In fact the whole basis of the incarnation rests on our transformation through Christ into a new humanity, which eschews conflict and is bound by live. In a world entirely governed by Christian values, there would surely be no conflict, violent or non-violent.

But we live in a world where the evidence of a fallen humanity is all around us. Whilst we may aspire to be citizens of the heavenly kingdom, we are also inescapably citizens of a secular order where war is an inevitability. We do not have to delve very far into scripture to find that war and conflict is part of the history of our faith. The first few books of the Bible are about the people of God coming back into Israel under the leadership of Moses and his successors, and this was achieved through conflict. Throughout the Old Testament, war is frequently the means by which chosen people distinguish themselves.

We can hardly claim that the church has refrained from war over the years: it is not so many centuries since popes could be seen on battlefields in full armour. More recently, the church has given its full backing to conflict. Speaking on the BBC in October 1939, the then Archbishop of York, William Temple, said, "Apart from those who hold that it can never be

right to take up arms at all, there is no division of opinion. There are those who believe we ought to have risked war sooner in resistance to aggression; there is no one who believes that it can ever be right to engage in war and yet holds back now. The unity of purpose in entry upon war is absolute." (Temple, *The Spirit and Aims of Britain in War*).

For a Christian to discern when it is right to go to war is not easy. The 13th century theologian, Thomas Aquinas, laid down three conditions for a just war: firstly, the process of war must be begun by legitimate authority; secondly, the cause must be just; thirdly, the participants should have a rightful intention, intending the advancement of good, or the avoidance of evil (*Summa* 2.2 Q40). Needless to say, many other schemes have been formulated for making judgement in the case of war, but they all contain at least these three points. Another consideration which we might hold in our minds is that of what the consequences are of whatever course we pursue. If we had not gone to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, would we just have been allowing more time for a serious situation to become more serious, and possibly end in a more destructive scenario?

Part of the responsibility of being a Christian living in a secular world is to take some part in the decisions our society has to face. We have seen many Christians and non-Christians take part in debates about recent conflicts, some very vocally, and some less so. It does seem clear that our faith does not tell us to refuse war, but it does tell us to avoid it. In our prayers today and every day, let us pray for the peace of the world, for those who make decisions on our behalf, for those who serve in the armed forces and who engage in conflict, and let us also pray for ourselves, that we may help to bring about a peaceful and just society, where war no longer takes place.

The Revd Michelle Montrose