

Sunday, October 29, 2023. Rev. Dr. David Thompson

Remembrance Day 2023

“Calmly facing grim realities”

Text: Jesus answered: “You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but **see to it that you are not alarmed**. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁷ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places...

At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, ¹¹ and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. ¹² Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold...and from the sermon on the mount:

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God.”

The **man on the Clapham omnibus** is a hypothetical ordinary and [reasonable person](#), used by the courts in [English law](#) where it is necessary to decide whether a party has acted as a reasonable person would. The character is a reasonably educated, intelligent but nondescript person, against whom the defendant's conduct can be measured.

Similarly in our day we often talk about the person in the street and his/her view of the world.

I personally cannot find anyone who thinks that the world is going in the right direction at present and I think that every ordinary person riding on the Clapham omnibus or walking the street would agree. Why?

Here are some grim realities:

- The leading cause of death of young people in the Americas is drug overdose
- Russia has invaded the Ukraine and unleashed horrific destruction wiping out entire cities and causing millions to flee
- Hamas has invaded Israel with terrible atrocities. Israel has responded by bombing Gaza. Tor Wennesland, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, said he feared the world is at the brink of a deep and dangerous abyss...

- **Climate change is a grim reality: As António Guterres secretary General of the United Nations has said:**

If we do not change course...we risk missing the point where we can avoid runaway climate change, with disastrous consequences for people and all the natural systems that sustain us.

- Migrants: They are moving around across the world due to conflict, poverty and climate change. More than 20,000 migrants have perished in the Mediterranean Sea since 2014. As I speak thousands wait at the American Border with Mexico
- The Republican Party in the USA has embraced lies and falsehoods and has swung toward extreme right wing ideology imperilling Democracy. Mitt Romney says that he no longer recognizes the Republican party.
- Democracy is in decline in the world as right wing parties lean towards autocracy. It is a sad trend because Democracies don't go to war with each other...the more democracies the less war
- The institutions of society are not as trusted as they once were.
- And at a time when churches are needed the most they are in rapid decline in the western world

There are many more grim realities that confront our world, far too numerous to mention.

Today we remember those who died in wars: WW1, WW 2, Korea, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Africa and that list goes on.

In 1919 Armistice day was set up which became our Remembrance Day so that we would not forget the sacrifices made to preserve freedom.

Why Remember?

Remembrance Day was dedicated to remember the one hundred Million humans who perished in the wars of the 20th century, 60 million of whom perished in WW2.

Following the Second World War what has become known as The Great Generation of men and women, returned from war with a determination to try to rebuild a better world.

Appalled at the loss of their comrades and many feeling survivor's guilt, they decided that since they had been able to survive that they needed to keep faith with those who had died.

They got busy.

1945 saw the founding of the United Nations with a text prominently displayed in front of the UN headquarters in New York: "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

Hoover Institution scholar Victor Davis Hanson has praised the Greatest Generation for winning World War II and guiding... postwar growth. He wrote in an article published in *Newsweek* magazine in 2018:

"The generation that came of age in the 1940s had survived the poverty of the Great Depression to win a global war that cost 60 million lives, while participating in the most profound economic and technological transformation in human history..."

"Their achievement from 1941 to 1945 remains unprecedented..."

In Canada The Great Generation also impacted the Presbyterian Church. All across the country Christian education wings were built in the 1950's because the Great Generation knew the importance of teaching good moral values to the next generation's children.

Already here at Knox was a building that was built for the proposed 1925 union of Methodists and the Presbyterians in Stratford. That was why it was built so large and with such grandeur. So, when the 50's came along the facilities were all there and the Sunday school was full as was the church itself.

But when the building mortar was imperilled, the Great Generation stepped up to the plate and served 2 roast beef dinners a day in the summers for 5 years to serve the Stratford festival guests. They took down the unsafe tower, and re-mortared the endangered parts of the building.

We remember them today with awe.

Speaking in the contexts of wars and earthquakes and famines Jesus asked his followers to be calm:

See to it that you are not alarmed, He said.

Jesus was an absolute realist who saw wars going on and famines and earthquakes into the indefinite future, and yet he was someone who told us to love our enemies anyway! In the face of grim realities he taught us to remain calm and modelled that behaviour himself.

There is much precedent in scripture for staying calm in the face of danger.

- I think of David Before Goliath and of Saul cowering in his tent. David was calm. He was not alarmed but took action to address the situation. Fear paralyzed Saul.
- I think of Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem while under threat. Calmly he supervised the placing of each stone of the walls refusing to be intimidated.
- I think of Jesus, popular in Tiberias but a wanted man in Jerusalem, calmly riding on a donkey not a war horse into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday
- I think of Jesus before Pilate...calm, quiet, peaceful
- I think of Jesus on the cross caring about his mother and a thief beside him being crucified
- I think of St. Paul chained 24/7 to a Roman soldier calmly writing letters from prison that changed the world for the better.
- I think of Nelson Mandela becoming the spiritual head of his prison and eventually President of South Africa, with his calmness presiding over a peace process that avoided a bloodbath in South Africa
- I think of Martin Luther King Jr. writing from prison and calmly facing the grim reality of his own death the night before he was killed

Where does this kind of calm come from?

Hebrews chapter 11 tells us that it comes from faith.

That faith tells us that there are grim realities we can change and we must do so. This is what the great Generation also understood.

But Churchill, a hero to the Great Generation, talked about facing the grim realities we cannot change.

He said of the failures that led up to the Second World war:

“There is nothing new in the story...it falls into that long dismal catalogue of the fruitlessness of experience and the confirmed unteachability of mankind.”

Jesus did however give us a way forward. He told us to love the enemy and do good to those who spitefully use us. He told us to love each other. He taught us to look after the sick, the lonely and the oppressed, to give a cup of water to the thirsty and food to the hungry and to visit those in prison. Jesus was a loving realist.

The calm he taught was not a ‘weak resignation to the evils we deplore’ but was a productive, kind, deep caring.

Mali, a country in West Africa, is both poor, and large in terms of land mass. The Tuaregs are an Arabic nomadic people who saw their way of life disappearing under devastating drought. Proud and desperately poor, they felt powerless because their government was controlled by neighbours to the south. After being heavily armed by neighbours to the north, they became embroiled in a civil uprising in the early 1990's that took thousands of lives and created close to a million refugees.

The first democratically elected president of Mali decided that he would do whatever was necessary to end the violence.

He invited neighbours, organizations from the UN and representatives from the "enemy" to come together to make peace. He included women's groups, educators and peace advocates to a peace process that was difficult to sustain. But with calmness, patience, vision and creativity it began to bear fruit.

After a tentative peace agreement had been signed, the Tuareg rebels began to turn in their weapons in return for a government promise for education and help in starting a livelihood.

More than a thousand modern deadly weapons were collected, from automatic weapons to rocket launchers.

Then another problem arose. What to do with them all?

The Government thought that they should all come to the government.

The Tuaregs were reluctant to give up their precious weapons to the "enemy" which for them had been the government.

Emotions were raw, nerves were frayed.

Then a young, calm UN officer floated a simple but radical idea...burn them all. It was an idea that everyone hated because the government was so poor. There was a million dollars of weapons at stake. Burning them could be interpreted as treason.

For the Tuaregs who believed that a weapon was the way to manhood, turning them in was difficult, but burning them all was unthinkable.

For nearly a year the young UN officer in a calm, quiet and humble manner, negotiated, talked, cajoled, pushed and pulled to reach an agreement. There was opposition. Why burn weapons that could be turned into cash?

At times it seemed that violence would break out again.

But in the end calm, gentle persuasion carried the day.

On March 27th 1996, 3 thousand instruments of war were piled high on a concrete platform. They were covered with straw soaked in diesel fuel and in the legendary city of Timbuktu the fire of hope was set, not to hurt but to heal.

There was a precious image from that day captured by a UN filmmaker. It was of two soldiers, one black, the other white, one government and one rebel Tuareg, standing with their arms around each other, gazing wistfully into those magnificent flames. There they were, two young enemies who had probably known nothing in life, other than carrying a rifle, were cleansed of their hatred and freed from a desperate and violent future by a fire lit for Peace.

In Matthew 5:9 Jesus stated 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God' (ESV). Peacemakers, are those who promote God's peace. This peace is taken from the Hebrew word shalom, which can be defined as total or complete well being—both personally and communally.

The young UN officer understood that. So he calmly tried to implement it.

So can we!

Amen.