

Remembrance Sunday 2018     Julian Templeton  
Psalm 90     2 Peter 3:8-13

I want to begin my sermon today by telling the story of two Christian ministers: one British, one German.<sup>1</sup> David Pickering is Moderator of the United Reformed Church's Synod of Scotland. He was formerly Minister of St Andrew's United Reformed Church, Leeds. St Andrew's has been twinned with the Lutherkirche in Frankenthal, Germany for 47 years. Five years ago when it's pastor, Martin Henniger, sat in the Manse in Leeds and chatted with David, they discovered that both their grandfathers had fought in the battle of the Somme. David's grandfather had left him a box with nametag, horseshoe and German war biscuits. Martin's grandfather had left him an account of his time as soldier during the First World War in and a box of letters written to his later wife. Interestingly they had the same Christian names: Frederik and Friedrich.

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<sup>1</sup> The story and some of the reflections that follow are taken and adapted from *One Hundred Years after the First World War. Looking Back, Looking Forward*, © 2018, The United Reformed Church and Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz.  
[https://urc.org.uk/images/Ecumenical/Documents/One\\_hundred\\_years\\_after\\_the\\_First\\_World\\_War\\_Looking\\_back\\_looking\\_forward.pdf](https://urc.org.uk/images/Ecumenical/Documents/One_hundred_years_after_the_First_World_War_Looking_back_looking_forward.pdf)

David and Martin then decided that, as grandsons who had become friends, they would visit the area where 102 years ago both their grandfathers had fought on different sides. They did so knowing little about their grandfathers' movements during the battle of the Somme, but they were able to stand at the grave of David's grandmother's cousin and in the valley where David's grandfather's regiment moved forward to Mametz Wood defended by German soldiers. Here, and at other places, they learnt of the fierce fighting, the mowing down of men by machine gunfire the moment they left the relative safety of their trenches. They saw the craters caused by massive explosions. They tried to imagine what it must have been like to see 'the enemy' in 100 or 300 meters distance across no-man's-land and then marching towards you. To listen to the constant noise of the bombardment; to wait to 'go over the top'; angst turning into aggression.

From many parts of the battlefield the soldiers would have been able to see the statue of Mary on the top of the steeple of the Basilica Notre Dame at Albert holding out the infant Christ triumphantly to the town and the area. But in 1916 shelling hit and damaged the steeple and almost brought the statue down.



It was almost as if the war could not endure Christ the Prince of Peace being presented to those who were fighting. Mary and Jesus were almost falling over, but not totally—as you can see from the picture—the statue was still holding on, just! So, one might say, Christ was not absent from the terrible battle that raged; in the maelstrom of bullets and bombs fired by Christians on both sides, Christ was suffering too. God was to be found in the brokenness. This was the experience David's grandfather, Frederik, brought home from a terrible night of shelling at Misery, a village not far away, and it formed his life as a minister.

Although the church and statue were badly damaged during battle, after the war the building was restored and the statue was reinstated:

[see photo of restored statue and steeple on next page]



This was what David and Martin saw on the horizon when they visited the former battlefield. And when travelled closer they were able to see the statue where Mary holds out the infant Jesus to the world. The infant Jesus, in turn, has his arms outstretched. It is a posture that combines a mother's sacrifice and a son's sacrificial embrace. Jesus is offered, with his arms outstretched, signifying the same outstretched arms that he, in turn, would offer on the cross as a man for the forgiveness of sins and redemption of the world.

And what was the response of the nations following the armistice declared 100 years ago today? There was relief and celebration by the Allied forces and nations. Germany overthrew its Kaiser and became a republic; but hundreds of thousands of its citizens would die of starvation due to the ongoing allied naval blockade of German ports. Combatants and Porters from 177 nations returned home. But the relief was soon followed by the realisation of the unprecedented death toll: 9 million combatants, 7 million civilians. Yet those deaths were dwarfed in scale by the 1918-20 influenza pandemic that killed an estimated 50 to 100 million people. For British and Commonwealth peoples there was, due to the policy of non-repatriation of bodies or remains, a growing demand for memorials with the names of those who had died. In my hometown of Riverton, New Zealand,

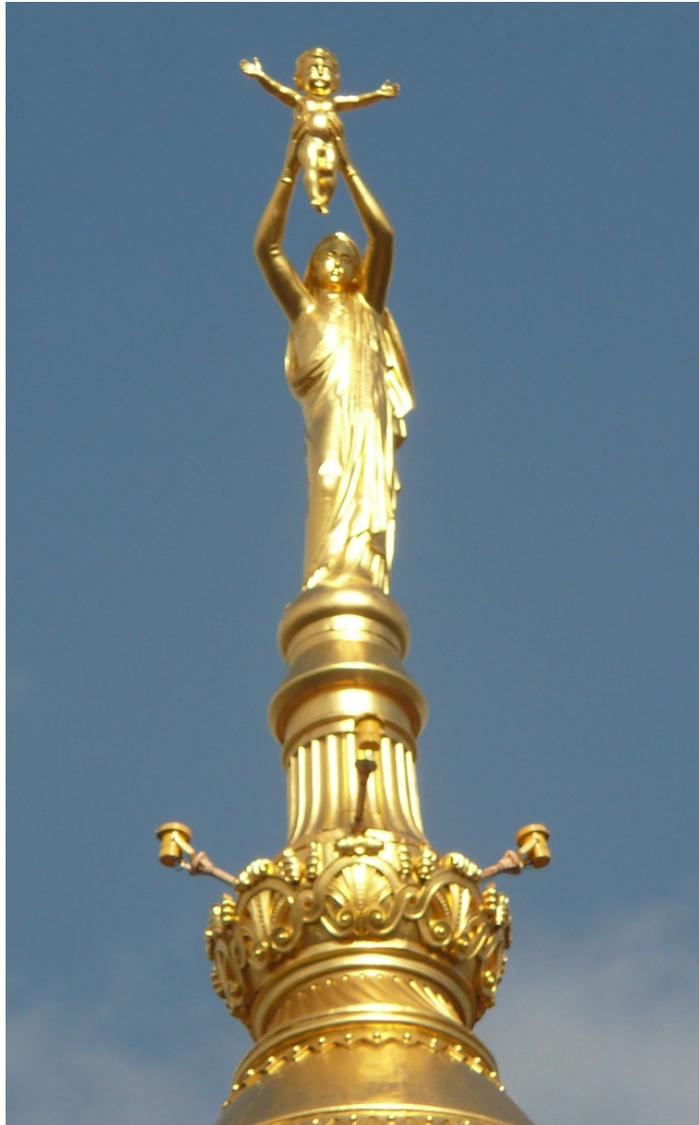
for example, a prominent war memorial was erected with the name of 60 men who “gave their lives in the Great War” (with a further 20 who “made the supreme sacrifice in the Second World War). The predecessors of St John’s Church, also, memorialised their war dead on stone and metal memorial plaques, photos of which are in our Memorial Book and the names of which are listed on our church website.

The wider aftermath of the war saw the victors, in the Treaty of Versailles, demanding financial reparations from the defeated nations. In 1919 the editor of *The Observer*, JL Garvin dismissed the Treaty as “peace with folly,” arguing that its harsh terms “repeat the fatal precedents which have always led back to war”, and added, with some prescience, that it left the Germans with “no real hope, except in revenge.” Fourteen years later, Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, and a Second World War would follow.

The aftermath of that war would see Europe divided into Communist East and Democratic West. But it also saw the birth of the United Nations and the Marshall Plan: the latter being an example of having learned something from the disastrous Versailles Treaty terms. The western nations, partly through mutual cooperation, were able to build on the debris of war, and even, in the case of Germany and France,

to find a way of reconciling past grievances. Christians were at the forefront of recognising the need for reconciliation. That’s the reason why the two churches in Leeds and Frankenthal, along with many others, were twinned. That’s largely the reason why the European Economic Community, and later, the European Union, were created. By the forging of an economic partnership, and later, a political union, differences between European nations would no longer be resolved by war but by political negotiation and the balancing of economic and social obligations.

However, the forging of a relationship between nations is one thing; the extricating of a nation from over forty years of close cooperation is another, so it seems, much more difficult and costly thing, as United Kingdom is discovering, having given notice of its decision to leave the European Union. But the political landscape in Germany has also changed. The far-right *Alternative Für Deutschland* party has elected representatives in 14 of the 16 German state parliaments, and is the third-largest party in the federal parliament, the *Bundestag*, something that would have been almost unthinkable 10 years ago. In many other European countries nationalist, nativist extremist movements are gaining more supporters.



The problem of how best to respond to grievance and resentment remains a challenge for all nations today. The temptation to look for scapegoats and to demonise minorities for a society's problems is ever-present. Friends, we must resist the temptation to scapegoat and demonise. It is a too-easy form of blame shifting. Instead, let us scrutinise our own attitudes, and, as Christians, affirm that the reason Mary symbolically holds forth the infant Jesus is because he presents a more honest solution to the problem within us; the problem that the Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn described as: 'the line of good and evil that runs through the centre of each one of us.'

“It is not that that the Lord is slow in keeping his promise, as some suppose, but that he is patient with you. It is not his will that any should be lost, but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Pet. 3:9)

God's providential purpose continues even through wars and their aftermath. God wants partners who will not take the too-easy route of blame shifting but who will take the harder and more honest route of repentance and of trusting that Jesus is the once-and-for-all sacrifice for our mistakes and sins. When we admit our own culpability to God, his gracious gift is the forgiveness that enables a fresh start. Thanks be to God.