

Heavy stuff, our readings this morning.

Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. ... but by your endurance you will gain your souls.

I don't know about you, but I sense in myself a deep anxiety that won't go away. I don't think I'm alone. I hear it from others, too. A fear that the securities we enjoy in our daily lives are more fragile than we like to think.

When I turned to the readings, to prepare for this sermon, my heart sank. I wanted to be reassured. I wanted some comfort. I want the fear to go away. I wanted to be able to give you, on Remembrance Sunday, a sense of security and peace.

But no. I'm challenged by the readings not to deal in easy panaceas.

So let me face into those fears, on this Remembrance Sunday.

The most immediate fear comes as I try to digest the news from the United States. How could so many have voted for Trump that he's heading for the White House? I'm stunned. But not totally surprised. Since Brexit we have learned not to trust the polls. Not to underestimate the widespread disaffection of so many today. The desire for change; the passion to overthrow seemingly tired institutions and establishments.

The events of previous months have revealed an enormous disconnect – here, and in the States. A disconnect between what's in hearts and minds, and the political systems that we take for granted in Western democracy. So many who simply don't believe, any more, that it's possible to be heard within established democratic processes.

Now there are questions to explore about what the word 'democracy' means. But not now. Because I want to go deeper into why so many want change. What lies underneath that disaffection?

Many things, of course. A sense of unfairness, as some experience real poverty and see others growing richer – the widening inequalities of our society, evident in the North/South divide here in the UK. There's a retreat, too, from the idea of unity across regions and nations, a retrenchment: why should we think about the needs of strangers and aliens, when we're up against it? A sense of being overwhelmed by the immense global movements – 60 million – fleeing war, violence, famine, insecurity; seeking a new home. And no longer do people trust experts, professional politicians, those with experience and learning – they belong to a political system seen not as democratic, but as elitist and corrupt. The fears and disaffection is not difficult to understand. It's a world of change, of disrupted stabilities.

And so we live in a world increasingly dominated by fear. It swirls around, transferred and contagious. It undermines trust between people, between nations. It's fuelled by those who want the fear, who deliberately terrorise to destabilise. Or who themselves are expansionist, ready to take advantage of weakness. We are caught up in global forces, including the serious threat of global warming and climate change which makes us all more fearful than we tend to admit. Massive global forces at play which stir deep fear and destroy trust.

Dante put those who undermine trust at the very bottom of hell. Without trust, societies can't function. We need a basic trust between people, between nations, for stability and negotiation to happen, for politics rather than war to prevail.

When we are fearful, often we look for a leader who articulates the fear and offers answers. And there are such leaders around us: all attractive because they offer easy certainties. They create straightforward divisions between us and them. America, Britain will be great again, if we get rid of them. Islam will be great again if it destroys the West. Russia will be great if it invades its neighbours, controls the Middle East.

The most tempting thing to do, as we feel the fear, is to fall into the same dynamic ourselves. To start to think tribally, to divide the world into us and them. To lose compassion for the other – whoever she or he might be. To fail to see the humanity and dignity of all. To distrust rather than trust. And then fear begins to have its head.

That's when our Christian faith needs to kick in. Because if faith in Jesus Christ means anything, it must give us the resources to dig deeper than the fear, to find a bedrock that is secure and enduring. The psalms help. So many of them speak into that fear and remind us of God. Psalm 18, for instance:

I love you, O Lord my strength. The Lord is my crag, my fortress and my deliverer. My God, my rock in whom I take refuge.

If our Christian faith gives us anything, it is the strong assurance that the fears and terrors of this present age are not the final word.

Jesus – in a world as fragile as our own – knew that the only abiding peace lay in God. Any who face death, war, famine, illness and disease, on whatever scale, face that ultimate question: is there something deeper than this fear I feel? If you endure you will gain your soul, he said.

We need resilience in these times. Faith and love that casts out fear. We need to dig deep. To ask God's grace to know the peace of heart and mind that holds us through the anxiety and fear. That enables us to trust our neighbours; to continue to trust the institutions of public life that protect us against the arbitrary power of the dominant and tyrannical, with their popular appeal.

On this Remembrance Sunday our thoughts go back to the trenches 100 years ago. A book recently published helps. It tells of soldiers who drew comfort from the abundance of nature around. Cecil Baring, a teenaged 2nd lieutenant, wrote in his journal of the kingfishers and sandpipers, the redshanks. He listened to a grasshopper warbler all the night. Of a golden oriole. A pied wagtail haunting a large shell hole full of water. *Where Poppies Blow** recounts how Tommies grew flowers in the trenches and displayed the daffodils and gladioli in empty shell cases. How they risked their lives to rescue gassed hedgehogs. The author Lewis-Stempel believes that this appreciation of nature not only helped the soldiers through their fear, but also reminded them of why they were fighting: for King and Countryside.

As we remember all those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for our todays and tomorrows, let's also hold onto the precious delights of life that remind us of a love that is deeper, stronger, more enduring than the troubles of this present age. When we feel fear, let us listen for signs of grace around us, to find that deeper love that drives out the fears and anxieties that destroy.

The greatest enemy is fear, after all. It is overcome by our refusal to let it take hold. It can't take hold when we continue to rejoice in the wonder of life, the beauty around us, the joy of love. Hope, love, joy that spring from the reality of God, that knows the depths of human condition, and yet is not overcome.

We need also to believe in the institutions that enable trust to flourish. Civil associations, local and national politics. Our democracy is tried and tested and works. We need to be its champions when it is threatened by false prophets.

We live in increasingly fearful and troubled times, in the shadow of the cross. We also live in the light and life of the resurrection, where grace, trust and love are real. Where perfect love casts out fear. Let that love rule our lives, and the world.

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*John Lewis-Stempel *Where Poppies Blow: the British Soldier, Nature and the Great War* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson)