

FOR THE WEAK

Ezekiel 34:1-16, 23-24
John 10:1-10

This is Remembrance Day.

It is a day to remember the service men and women who died and those who suffered in two horrendous World Wars.

It is a day to remember those who were not in uniform but also suffered terribly.

It is a day to remember those who still risk their all, and those who still suffer in war and in striving for peace.

It is a day to remember the faults of the past and to resolve, "Never Again."

This is a day for the weak.

It is a day which can bring back feelings long buried - uncover old injuries, bring up terrible memories, so that some question why we do this year after year.

By some it has been taken to be a day of national pride. I see it as a day to consider human shame. For it is to our shame as the human race that wars happen, that wrong is done which cannot be put right in any other way. It is to our shame, as beings made in the image of God that we impose suffering and horror on each other, and that we do not consider and learn from the past, but repeat its patterns and mistakes. This is a day when our weakness is exposed.

This is a day for the weak.

This is the day when we wear the red poppy, to remember blood spilt. Today I also wear a white poppy, which has been worn since the 1930s to represent the hope of peace and the determination to work for peace.

This is a day for the weak.

This is a day for the weak, and God declares himself on the side of the weak, of the sick, of the injured, of the strayed, of the lost. He sees them as sheep, abandoned by shepherds who look on them only as a source of income, of riches, and who do not look to the interests of the animals in their care, but use and abuse them until they are used up and worn out and useless.

When Ezekiel spoke his parable, he had in mind the priests, the religious leaders who had demanded their ten per cent, and had not inspired devotion and worship for God in their flock; had not modelled God's compassion for his people in the way they took care of the people in their charge. And so God's people were in poor shape, physically scattered in exile, and spiritually scattered as they went after the high places of false worship, and took to themselves the truth-less faith of their captors. The Priests were only for themselves, but God says he is for the weak.

Ezekiel spoke of the priests, and maybe it is the church and its leaders who come to mind as you consider the picture of the scattered, sick and helpless flock. The church may cause damage, but God is for the weak.

Or maybe it is other groups that come to your mind. Maybe it is the government, who still allows people to fall between the cracks in care provided, so that we find beggars on our streets, or old people in hospital whose dignity is ignored, and whose basic care is skimped. Maybe it is the military authorities who are accused

of not giving sufficient care to wounded soldiers, and not providing proper housing for service families. Maybe it is the evil men and women who lure poverty-stricken women and children from their homes with promises of jobs and good money, then sell them into slavery, so that they are used and abused until their lives are not worth preserving and their own sense of worth is completely eaten away. Maybe it is our business leaders who drive such hard bargains with exporters that such desperate poverty is known. When we hear the parable of the bad shepherds, there are many people who could come to mind. Maybe even ourselves.

Whoever comes to mind, this is a day for reflection, for looking back and looking around, and resolving: "Never Again."

The bad shepherds look out for themselves, but God is for the weak.

When soldiers marched off to the First World War, almost 100 year ago, they were told that this was the war that would end wars. When they came back, things were to be different than they had been before. They were to be better. And they were different, but they were not better, not for everyone. Certainly it was not a war to end wars, and those who came home lived to see their own sons and daughters go off to war as well.

God uses Ezekiel's parable to tell the people that when they come back from exile it will not be to the same old trouble that there was before. They won't be used and abused by the priesthood, by those in power. He has sacked the priests, and from now on they must allow him to lead them himself. He has appointed himself to be the shepherd of the sheep. He will send his servant David to take care of them. There will be security, and there will be provision, and especial care will be taken of the most vulnerable. God is for the weak.

Things were different after the exile, but gradually the tyranny of the temple came to the fore again, demands were made but no care was taken. The people were harried and helpless, a source of revenue for the Romans, thinking that even God had abandoned them. And their priests cared more for form, for religious propriety, than for compassion. Jesus described them as sheep without a shepherd. And so he set out to be the shepherd which they needed. He set out to be the good shepherd.

He opened the gateway to God's presence, where the weak, and those who were damaged could find protection. He led them in the right way, and by his own person protected them from all those who would harm them. He did not despise the weak, but treasured them.

Today we stand at our war memorials and say "We shall remember them." But what of their successors? What of the scars that remembering can cause to throb? What of those who cannot take the time to remember the past because the present is so constantly with them in hurt, in ignoring, in the neglect of the shepherds?

We live in a nation that is a damaged flock, with people going off after this and that source of comfort, without shepherds who will lead them in a caring and true way. We live in a community which has grown global, so that we affect the lives of others, and our lives are affected by what is done in countries far away. If you doubt that, just see what is happening to the banks in this country, because of what has happened with lending in America. The "Sub-prime market" I gather it is called. We live in a world of scattered flocks and damaged sheep. The question we must answer is this: are we on the side of the weak? Are we, like God, for the weak?

If we are, then this day of remembrance must be more than a formality. We must do more than stand by our memorials and say "We will remember them." If we would honour those who have suffered and died, and those who have been bereaved,

and whose lives have been scarred - and if we would honour those who continue to suffer from the effects of wars past and present, then as we remember we must pledge ourselves to care.

“I will seek the lost,” says God, “And I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.” If we would ally ourselves with the Good Shepherd, if we call ourselves his followers, then, this is what we too must do. We must pledge ourselves to care, not in a sentimental way, but practically. We must be offering our presence and our practical aid to those around us who need help, and we must also be living in such a way as promotes change in this world. “Blessed are the peace-makers,” said Jesus, and we must be peace-makers. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” And that is our calling too. We must make the effort, write the letters, lobby those with power, stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, and all in the name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

If we do that, allying ourselves with those who suffer, then this day of remembrance will be worth observing, and the dead and hurt will be fittingly remembered. If we do that then what has come after war will indeed be different, be better. Let us look to Christ, the great Shepherd of the Sheep and follow in his way, as we live our lives with love for those who suffer.