

Scriptures: Micah 4:1-5; Psalm 46; James 3:13-18; Matthew 5:43-47

Every year on November 11, Canadians pause to remember the men and women who have served, and continue to serve our country during times of war, conflict and peace.

In our remembrance today, let us also honour the memory of the countless millions who have lost their lives in times of conflict, and to pray for peace on earth. We sometimes think of earlier periods of history as being times of barbarism, but the twentieth century was the bloodiest century in all of human history. In the Second World War alone over seventy million people lost their lives, and more than half of them were civilians.

The Second World War came as a sequel to the First, which was so horrific that when it was over people called it “The War to End All Wars.” But the end did not last long, and the sad story continues to this day – vengeance leads to more vengeance, killing leads to more killing.

Friends, there is no more important topic, no more urgent priority, no more relevant imperative in the Bible than peace: the peace of the world, peace among nations, peace between human beings and nature in creation, peace among races, peace within nations and tribes, clans and families, peace between siblings, peace between human beings and God, and finally, peace of heart – the peace of God which passes all human understanding.

It is no wonder that when prophets come among us they often speak of peace, and dream of peace, for without peace we humans cannot flourish. There can be no economy, no education, no art or culture, no food security in places where lives are being shattered by war. We have known that for thousands of years. And so the prophets pray for, and plead for peace.

In our first lesson, we heard the vision of the prophet, Micah. *“Many nations shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of God; that the Lord may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. God shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; 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; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.”*

This text appears in almost identical form in two places in the Hebrew Scriptures, here in Micah 4, and in Isaiah 2, leading some scholars to think it may have been sung as a hymn or psalm in Hebrew worship. This was also an important passage for the early Christians. In the first two or three centuries of the Christian era this was one of the scripture passages that new converts were encouraged to memorize, because it gives such a clear vision of God’s ultimate purposes for the creation.

Micah prophesied a future of hope, an ideal world, a world when nations come together in peace instead of war. He lifts up the hope that one day there will be a time when God’s word goes out from Jerusalem and the whole world listens to it. He speaks of a time when the arms of war will be turned into farming tools and people will live in peaceful community. The weapons are not simply disposed of – rather, the machines of war are melted down and re-shaped into ploughshares and pruning hooks. In other words, when God’s reign comes in all its

fulness, there will be safety and security, and everyone will live together in peace. The prophet uses beautiful imagery, *“all people shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.”*

It is important to note that the text does not say that in God’s future reign there will be no disputes. Disputes are not necessarily a problem; there are disputes and disagreements in virtually all relationships. Jesus himself turned tables over, both metaphorically and physically. His arguing though, often with those in power, spoke to the deepest longings of the human heart.

It is the way disputes and disagreements are handled. The stubborn and self-centered approach says, “This is the way I want it, and this is the way it’s going to be.” That is why relationships, partnerships and alliances break up, and this is often what causes disagreements between nations to end up in conflict and bloodshed.

Friends, we know about the endless and horrifying sequence of wars, conflicts, genocides, and ethnic cleansings which have caused unspeakable suffering: millions and millions of victims, families, and countries destroyed, an ocean of refugees, misery, hunger, disease, underdevelopment, and the loss of immense resources. At the root of so much suffering there lies a notion of supremacy fueled by the desire to dominate and exploit others, by ideologies of power or totalitarianism, by nationalism or ancient hatreds.

This is not to say that there are no arenas in which force is necessary. At times brutal and systematic violence, aimed at the very extermination or enslavement of entire peoples and regions has to be countered by armed resistance.

The Christian understanding of peace – true peace, and not just a surface tranquility – is more than the avoidance of war. It is more than the absence of conflict. Peace is far from passivity. Peace is an active force that comes from the heart, seeking the good of another. It comes from trust, patience, tolerance and faith. It is not unilateral. It cannot be “Peace only on my terms.” It results from mutual agreement and understanding. It is about building relationships between people, between communities, between nations, relationships which positively and constructively create a love and care for others founded on justice for all. Peacemaking involves engaging with people making war and understanding the reasons they do so. Peace is something that is difficult to bring about and requires constant effort and engagement in order to maintain.

Jesus taught, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.”* He also said, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, forgive those who have done you any injustice.”*

All peoples long for love, friendship, welcome, acceptance, mercy, forgiveness, hope, and perhaps most important today, peace. These are the words that unite rather than divide, and as Jesus’ followers, we are challenged to take them off the page and live them, and so in some small way anticipate the reign of God of which Jesus spoke.

But how do we live in such a vision for peace, so overwhelming in its claim? How shall we be peacemakers in a world at war, and at a time of great uncertainty? Realistically what can you and I do?

Friends, the driving force for peace must come from us. The Christian always begins peacemaking with self, with nearest neighbours, and with God. We can do very little about war-

torn regions of our world, but we can strive to live a different way – a way of peace and reconciliation. We do so by how we choose to live our lives. We have choices to make, challenges to meet, as we dedicate ourselves and our energies to that which is good and just and peace filled.

May I suggest that we move from the large vision to the small daily discipline of living out the meaning of our own personal faith.

This requires that we decrease that which is destructive, that which limits us, so that the spirit of peace may grow in us.

Therefore –

Let us decrease what is greedy in our lives, the self-serving, the need to control others. And let us increase sharing, generosity and compassion, the ability to see others as people who also have their desires and needs.

Let us decrease what is fearful and defensive, the unresolved angers and frustrations in our lives. And let us increase trust, openness, and the desire to seek solutions.

Let us decrease what is false and untruthful in our lives, the illusions we hold, the prejudices, biases. And increase honesty, honesty about ourselves, our neighbours, honesty about our society and our role in the injustices of society.

Let us decrease what is hateful and alienating in our lives. And let us increase healing and forgiveness, which ultimately are the only source of life and peace.

Friends, our faith basks in great promises, promises of peace and restoration for all peoples. We pray earnestly and fervently for this day to come. In the meantime, there are daily disciplines, day-to-day tasks, work that requires time and intentionality. We know we don't get it right all the time. I certainly don't. But as we work toward Micah's vision of peace, and what Jesus taught us, and what James expressed as the wisdom from above, we will notice the fulfilment of the promise, the increase of sharing, of compassion, of generosity, of hope, of truth-telling, healing and forgiveness.

In our remembrance today and every day, let us strive to play our part in building a world in which all have a valued place, where no one is afraid, and where all can live in peace. Lest we forget. Thanks be to God. Amen