Sermon for Remembrance Sunday 8 November 2026

1 Thessalonians 4 verses 13-18
Matthew 25 verses 1-13

John Buchan, made his name with the novel 'The Thirty-Nine Steps'. He is *also* the author of a less well-known book called 'These for Remembrance': tributes to six close friends who died in the Great War. The book is addressed to his children so that they may understand what he describes as 'the cataclysm'. He writes:

'There will be one difference (I hope) between your circle and mine. (…) The men who were at school and college just before me, my own contemporaries, and my juniors by as much as twenty years – upon them came the ends of the earth. They propped up the falling heavens and saved the world for you. But most of them died of it. I hope that will never befall you which has befallen me – to look around and find a great emptiness.'

My lively and indomitable grandmother, Beatrice, was born into this war-torn generation. Her older brother Hugh, left home to fight in the trenches, with the words *'Goodbye, Girl, I won't see you again.'* So, it proved. Hugh's mother, my great-grandmother, died of Spanish flu and a broken heart in 1918. In her late eighties, my granny Beatrice was still unable to speak of these bereavements. My mother was born in 1939. Her father, Peter, spent *just two months* with his bride, my maternal grandmother, before returning to active service in the navy. He lived long enough to know that my mother had been *born*, but he never *met* his daughter. The bridge of his ship was torpedoed.

My family was not untypical. Many families fared much worse. The total death toll of the First World War is estimated between 15 and 22 million deaths. The death toll of the Second World War stands between 70 and 85 million, including approximately six million Jewish people. Losses sustained during the convulsive wars of the twentieth century rightly stop us in our tracks on Remembrance Sunday.

We gather to commemorate them and to pray for peace. Church may be the best place to do this. God has arms wide enough to hold the pain of the dire realities of armed conflict. *Because* war brings out both the best and worst in human nature it raises the deepest questions about the heights of our latent heroism and the depths of our potential depravity. The Christian understanding of human beings as deeply flawed is clear-eyed about our negative potential. But, in Jesus's sacrifice on the cross, God opened a way for full forgiveness, such that no one is irredeemable.

War leaves life-long marks of grief, but faith in the resurrection helps. As Paul explains to the Thessalonians:

'Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.'

Furthermore, the church proclaims that our turbulent world history, is contained within the huge timeframe of God's eternal purposes, which – *however bad things get down here* – are never thwarted.

God's purposes are always rolling inevitably forwards towards a final reality of peace, love and justice.

It's no coincidence that our readings today focus on the second coming of Christ. Paul reminds us that this is history's *destination*:

'For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.'

I used to find Remembrance Sunday unbearably sad. Now I think how spectacular will be the reunions in heaven between my grandmother Beatrice and her brother Hugh; between my grandfather, Peter and my mother. And what a future they will share: bliss 'with the Lord' and with each other, forever.

This brings us to the wise and foolish virgins of our gospel reading. Half the virgins have their torches lit to welcome the bridegroom's arrival – as Jewish custom dictated – but half have to nip to the shop to get more oil and miss the whole thing. The bridegroom represents Jesus's second coming. Will we be wise and ready or unwise and caught unawares? In war, everyone has a heightened awareness of mortality. In peacetime, we can delude ourselves that our time is endless and that the end is not nigh. Today's reading reminds us not to nod off.

We are a little country church. Yes. But we are also the Barrowden First Infantry Division of the Church Militant here on earth. We have a job to do. We witness to the forgiveness of God through Christ; we witness to full redemption; we witness to resurrection and eternal life. Our world of strife needs this message, so we must keep our faith awake and our witness lit in readiness for the final coming of the Prince of Peace.

'Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.'

Amen