

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker  
at Essex Church, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2010

# Remembrance Sunday: Swords into Ploughshares

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
We will remember them.*

To The Fallen – poem written in 1914 by Laurence Binyon

Good morning everybody and welcome to this our special Remembrance Sunday service here at Essex Church, where this community known as Kensington Unitarians meets each Sunday for worship. As Unitarians we do not have one message to proclaim on a day such as this. Some people here are pacifists and view war as a crime against our very humanity, some people may consider war a sometimes terrible necessity. Our lives, just like the lives of all other human beings, will have been touched by war in different ways because war is an uncomfortable reality for us all.

## Chalice Lighting:

We silently stood a moment ago in memory of all those who gave their lives in warfare to preserve our liberty. The famous words written by Laurence Binyon speak of the soldiers who have died. May this living flame, symbol of our world wide liberal religious faith, burn brightly today to commemorate all those people whose lives have been taken or blighted by warfare the world over, not least of whom are the civilians. So as well as those who fight and are wounded or killed in wars let us remember the old, the young, the women and all those who are caught up in warfare not as participants but as shocked and frightened bystanders. May this our flame burn brightly today as we remember and reflect.

## Prayer:

If there is to be peace in the world,  
*There must be peace in the nations.*

If there is to be peace in the nations,  
*There must be peace in the cities.*

If there is to be peace in the cities,  
*There must be peace between neighbours.*

If there is to be peace between neighbours,  
*There must be peace in the home.*

If there is to be peace in the home,  
*There must be peace in the heart.*

And so may we nourish peace within ourselves that its message might spread from us to our homes and neighbours, that the message of peace might be sung in our cities and outwards to our nation and from our nation to all nations of the world. May a song of peace be heard in our world – again and again and again, Amen.

## Meditation:

Peace is calm and quiet and still  
Peace is finding ways to communicate – to speak and to listen  
Peace is being prepared to give ground sometimes  
Peace means acceptance of that which is  
Peace means finding gentle ways to right wrongs  
Peace means respect for those who are different from us  
Peace requires justice  
Peace is like sweet music after harsh and discordant sounds

What does peace mean to you?

Peace is like sweet music to our souls, and if there is to be peace  
the seeds of its beginnings may be found within our hearts and minds.

## Address:

*“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 sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no-one shall make them afraid.”*

— The prophet Micah

That image of people sitting beneath their own vines and fig trees at peace and unafraid is an appealing one isn't it, but when it was written by the prophet Micah in the southern Hebrew kingdom of Judah, it couldn't have been further from the truth. Micah, like most of the Hebrew prophets, lived in times of great political and social upheaval. The mighty Assyrian empire was threatening to attack and destroy the northern kingdom of Israel. Micah's vision was of a future time of peace and prosperity but around 725BC peace was, as now, not easy to find. And I wonder what Micah would think of the troubles that assail the land of his birth today if he could pay Israel and Palestine a visit.

My address today focuses on a number of inspiring peace projects around the world and if I were able to take the prophet Micah to visit the land of his birth I'd take him first to a world famous village of peace in Israel, where 50 Palestinian Arab and Jewish families live together. Its name is Neve Shalom – Wahat al-Salam – which translates as an oasis of peace - reflecting from the start the importance of the two languages Arabic and Hebrew that the children in the village school are taught in and community affairs are organised in. I visited this peace village soon after it had been opened in 1970 and was deeply impressed by its people's quiet sense of purpose. Their purpose has been thoroughly tested in the 40 years of the village's existence but it remains a beacon of hope for people of different nationalities and religions, an example showing that we can live together in peace and harmony. There is a school in the village which other children from the surrounding area attend and there is also a School for Peace which runs training programmes of many kinds for people from all around the world to come together and find ways to make connections where before there had been barriers and divisions.

Listen to these words from Wellesley Aron who co-founded this School for Peace – “I want to find the address of a place in this world ... where my grandson ... may go for training in the field of peace. I know quite a lot of institutions where he will be taught about war ... But surely there must be some places where peace is the subject of instruction.”

A few weeks ago fundraisers for this village of peace came to give a talk here at Essex Church organised by the Interfaith Seminary. They admired our banner showing symbols of the world's religions. They had brought a candle from the place they call their House of Silence. It is the spiritual centre of the village and encourages people of many faiths to be together in silence – a universal language. A candle of peace remains lit in that House of Silence and the fundraisers brought us one of their candles and took one of ours with them back to Israel. Their candle is burning here now on the table before us.

The news from the Middle East is so often dispiriting and yet there is so much positive work going on, often in quiet ways. If the prophet Micah could visit our world today and felt despair about the world's injustices I'd take him to visit my friend Sue Beardon. Sue is from Sheffield but at present is living in a village called Yanoun on the West Bank, in Palestinian territory but close to a number of Israeli settlements, some of which have been built illegally on Palestinian land. Sue is on a 4 month placement working for a group called Quaker Peace and Social Witness as an Ecumenical Accompanier serving on the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). These brave individuals provide protection by their presence and support Israeli and Palestinian peace activists and advocates for an end to the occupation of the West Bank. Ultimately Ecumenical Accompaniers you could say are there simply to bear witness to what is going on. Sue is sending us all regular email messages and they are eye opening for the complexity of the situation they reveal. For example, last month a nearby mosque was burnt by some militant Israeli settlers; local people of all faiths and races are working to build it again and a rabbi from Bethlehem arrived with a car full of copies of the Qu'ran to replace those that had been destroyed.

One of my friend Sue's many lovely features is that she plays the ukulele and she has found a group called Ukuleles for Peace that teach Arab and Jewish children to play this sweet and endearing instrument – as an instrument of peace and connection that can unite people who are being otherwise forced to take opposing sides in a drama not of their making. A village for peace and a ukulele orchestra for peace – just a few small examples of efforts made to bring about change in a seemingly intractable situation.

The First World War, that we heard poems about earlier on, was described wasn't it as the war to end all wars, so shocking was its waste of life, so horrific were its scenes of carnage. Yet since the 2nd World War the Peace Pledge Union estimate and I quote that “since ...1945 there have been over 250 major wars in which over 50 million people have been killed, tens of millions made homeless, and countless millions injured and bereaved. In the history of warfare the twentieth century stands out as the bloodiest and most brutal - three times more people have been killed in wars in the last ninety years than in all the previous five hundred, with civilians bearing a far greater burden in warfare than ever before.”

Despair would be an understandable response in the face of such statistics. But as people of faith I think a part of our work here on earth is to chorus another message, a message that says ... and yet ... despite everything peace may sometimes prevail. Change can and does come. I'm hesitant to speak of the situation in Northern Ireland as one that has been resolved, for there is much healing work still to be done and hundreds of years of hatred cannot be wiped clean by a power sharing agreement and the de-commissioning of weapons. But change has come to Northern Ireland – through the tireless work of so many committed and often unknown individuals.

Stephanie's reading earlier on about the bravery of Gordon Wilson after the death of his beloved daughter in a bomb attack in Enniskillen never ceases to move and inspire me. It challenges me to ask if I could find that level of love and forgiveness in my own heart. And I don't know that I could. Many people and many projects helped to make peaceful co-existence a possibility for the divided communities of Northern Ireland. I want to speak today of just one such project - the Corrymeela Community established in 1965 on the north west coast and committed to reconciliation projects in Ireland and throughout the world. From the start it was an ecumenical project designed to bring people of all faiths and especially from the Catholic / Protestant divide together, with a particular focus on education. The fact that Protestant and Catholic children are generally still educated separately means that the chances of youngsters from different communities to get to know one another are very limited. Hatred has a greater chance to breed when there is such separation so one aspect of the work of the Corrymeela Community is to run training programmes for teachers in ways to bring young people together.

Ray Davey one of the founders of Corrymeela writes about the central, spiritual space in the building which is called the Croi. "The Croi is a very special place in Corrymeela. The name itself means 'the Heart', so this place lies right at the centre of the Community's life both physically and spiritually. It is an open place in which all the different groups on site doing different things, with all sorts of different needs, and coming from different places and traditions, will come together to pray. ...

The dominant symbol inside the building is a tree beautifully worked on linen with coloured embroidery and set in a three part sliding screen. The artist, Liza Andrews, based it on Revelation 22 v 2, which describes how the tree is planted beside the river of the water of life, ... and 'the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations'. I always think what a wonderful sign the tree is of ... Community. Here is unity and diversity seen in the relationship between the trunk, the branches, the fruit and the leaves-some 300 of them embroidered in a simple pattern by people from all over the world." Words from Ray Davey co-founder of the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland.

The croi, the heart, it is here within us all I believe that the possibilities of peace begin. And so on this Remembrance Sunday let us remember all those who have lost their lives through war and all those who have dedicated their lives to peace. We human beings cannot choose where we are born, into which families or countries or religions. Some of us have the good fortune to have some choices as we grow up but many do not. Many can never leave the place where they are, many can do nothing but accept the messages of love or of hate with which they are brought up. May we who have some choices use them for the greater good of all, Amen.

## **Benediction:**

Let us go now in peace with gratitude in our hearts for the freedoms we may sometimes take for granted and with a commitment to do all we can to further the causes of justice in our world, Amen. Go well and blessed be.