A Shameful Centenary

Jonah 3¹⁻⁵,¹⁰; Psalm 62⁵⁻ᵉⁿᵈ; Hebrews 9²⁴⁻ᵉⁿᵈ; Mark 1¹⁴⁻²⁰

God spoke once, and twice I heard the same, that power belongs to God. [Psalm 62¹⁰⁻¹¹]

One of our science teachers from the school where I taught visited Coventry Cathedral with her boyfriend who was the German language assistant at school. In the space that is the old Cathedral in Coventry my colleague, viewing that iconic reminder of the Coventry Blitz, said, "What a shame? Who did this?" Her boyfriend tried to dismiss the questions and said, "It was war!" This carried on for a while and then my colleague insisted, "Who did it?" And her boyfriend simply replied (in a German accent), "We did it! We did! it"

That level about honesty about war is rare. For every life that is lost as a result of dispute and conflicts, the only honest response is "We did it!"

✠ 885,138 British servicemen died in the Great War (not the war to end all wars as it was stated)

✠ The total number of military and civilian casualties in World War I was about 40 million: estimates range from 15 to 19 million deaths and about 23 million wounded military personnel, and we need to recognise with deep sorrow that 2,370,000 Germans died too.

✠ 391,407 British servicemen have died in conflicts since that Armistice at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918.

✠ We need to hold before us the simple fact that there has only been one year without a British military casualty in a legitimate conflict since 1945.

We are no better than primitive savages if life is regarded as cheap or dispensable: God makes it clear that every life is known to him from conception and that every life is valuable, precious enough to be loved and redeemed.

You know that I always like to find the thing that ties the readings we have heard together: three out of the four readings speak about second chances.

✠ Jonah goes back to Nineveh, having run away and having been delivered by the fish. He preaches the need for repentance on the three days that it takes to cross the city. Such was the integrity in their repentance that the text tells us **God changed his mind about the calamity he had planned** - something that was a problem for Jonah!

✠ The Psalmist contrasts the dependability of God against the impotence of humanity: **the peoples are but a breath, the whole human race a deceit; on the scales they are altogether lighter than air**. We had the chance to learn it and then a second chance: **God spoke once, and twice I heard the same, that power belongs to God.**

✠ Hebrews contrasts the failure of human high priests in offering a sacrifice for sin - they have to keep doing it. So **Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many** shows that the opportunity to respond is extended until he **will appear a second time… to save those who eagerly wait for him**.

> Rather than waiting always for God's second chances, especially with regard to conflicts - small and great - we need to take responsibility: 'we did it!'

Mark records that when Jesus **came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God**. Somehow, in the midst of war and its remembrance we need to be able to find a way to apply good news!

> I am no pacifist: I believe that there are circumstances that justify risking lives for sake of a greater good. But that happens when there has been a catastrophic failure of responsibility, of humanity and of applying the good news from a God of second chances. When it is the only option, with remorse and with the heavy weight of responsibility we have to say, 'We did it!'

When peace is only an absence of conflict it doesn't give hope. Peace is something we can have faith in when the hearts of those with power are broken and remade by God.

> The poppy became the symbol of remembrance because it was the plant that grew on the battlefield, with the powerful red of the flower a reminder of the blood shed in war. As far as the ugliness of the blood, 'we did it' and as far as the beauty of the flower and the hope, 'God did it!'