

13 November 2022 at the 9.00 am and 10.30 am

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY

Sermon by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell Presbyterian Church

LECTIONARY READINGS:

Isaiah 40:21-31

21 Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

**22 He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.**

**He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.**

**23 He brings princes to naught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.**

**24 No sooner are they planted,
no sooner are they sown,
no sooner do they take root in the ground,
than he blows on them and they wither,
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.**

**25 “To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.**

**26 Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one
and calls forth each of them by name.**

Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.

27 Why do you complain, Jacob?

Why do you say, Israel,

“My way is hidden from the Lord;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?

28 Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.

29 He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

30 Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;

31 but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

1 There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:

2 a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,

3 a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,

4 a time to weep and a time to laugh,

a time to mourn and a time to dance,
5 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
6 a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
7 a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
8 a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

1 Peter 2:13-17

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. 16 Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your kind invitation to preach today and I feel privileged to be here with my wife Katherine.

I have known about Cromwell Presbyterian Church for many years ... although from a distance.

My sermon title is "Remembrance Sunday: an opportunity to remember our fallen, to remember our duty, and to remember God".

You might be thinking what is Remembrance Sunday?

Well, it is similar to ANZAC Day ... it is in fact the day when allied nations ... throughout the world ... remember those who have lived and died in the service of their country.

Now, this is becoming increasingly important in New Zealand ... because with significant immigration over the years ... many of our citizens ... want to remember those ... from their homeland ... who served and died ... but as they are not originally from Australia or New Zealand ... they sometimes feel excluded on ANZAC Day.

But not only that ... Remembrance Sunday – the first Sunday closest to Armistice Day ... which is the 11th of November – also allows us to unite ... in mind and spirit ... with all allied nations throughout the world ... with whom we share so much.

Today, I will provide an historical sketch of several military engagements, then briefly expound 1Peter 2:13-17, and finally conclude with a stirring account of one soldier's encounter with God ... before he died in battle.

Now our act of remembrance this morning is particularly poignant ... because of the current worrying **war in Ukraine**, which has the potential to spill over ... into a wider conflict ... using weapons of mass destruction.

The situation closer to home in the Pacific has also ... no doubt caused you concern.

For instance, in the last two weeks **North Korea** fired numerous missiles ... including an ICBM, threatening neighbouring nations.

In fact, the Japanese government sent out a warning to many of its citizens to take cover in shelters ... such was their concern arising from the uncertainty of North Korea's intentions.

North Korea also mobilised hundreds of combat aircraft as a show of strength to match American, Japanese, and South Korea military manoeuvres.

We are also aware of the **Chinese** engagement with Pacific nations ... questioning old loyalties.

The current dispute on the sovereignty of **Taiwan** ... is exercising ... political and military interests in the region.

We are aware of the **Spratly Islands** dispute, which is an ongoing territorial dispute between China, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Brunei, concerning "ownership" of the Spratly Islands. And this dispute could unravel into hostile military activity.

And I note with interest ... the **United Kingdom** with European and allied support ... recently deployed its new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth II ... and its task force ... to some of the disputed areas in the Pacific ... as a show of support and engagement.

So, as Spring unfolds in all its beauty and wonder in Otago ... we are cognizant of the wider political and military threats ... beyond our shores ... which have the potential to impact us.

But today ... on Remembrance Sunday ... let us reverently:

FIRSTLY, REMEMBER OUR FALLEN

Today we remember those who have lived ... and died ... in the service of our country.

Several years ago, I visited the battlefield of the **Somme** paying my respects at the New Zealand, British and Commonwealth memorials.

I have also been privileged to visit **Monte Casino** in Italy and there recalled the valiant effort of the New Zealand, British, American, Indian, and Polish forces in that cataclysmic battle.

On both occasions what struck me was the serenity and beauty of the cemeteries. Thousands of white headstones on manicured green lawns.

A colleague of mine visiting his war dead ... was stopped by the gardener lovingly tending each plot who said, **“I watch the cars go by, but no one stops anymore.”**

Well today, ladies and gentlemen, we have stopped. And we remember our fallen.

In the quietness of this place, for these few fleeting minutes, in reverent silence, before God, we remember our fallen.

Our churches are sacred places ... and they have a rich history ... in both peace and war.

I look up ... and about ... and I often see war memorial boards ... regimental colours ... and memorial windows ...

Church is a place where ... people committed their ways to God ... before military deployment.

And returning months ... or years later ... in worship services like today ... they gave thanks for a safe return.

Many ... I am sure ... also poured out their grief and anguish ... for those who never returned.

And throughout the various wars and military operations ... prayers were offered, and sermons preached, on the tragedy of war ... and the longing for peace.

Today, in this sacred place, we remember those days, and those who have gone before.

At **Gallipoli**, we remember the confusion of the landings ... the terrifying exposure to enemy fire ... the relief and victory that never came.

And for those who survived Gallipoli an even sterner test awaited months later, the battle of the **Somme** and **Passchendaele**.

The mere mention of these place names, over 100 years later, still has the power to evoke strong emotions ... mixed with sorrow and respect ... perhaps even with anger.

I would defy anybody to walk on the battlefields of the Somme and not be moved to the core of their being. Amidst the anguish and sorrow ... arises the simple question "why?"

What caused humanity ... to collapse into such wholesale slaughter?

Questions and feelings ... I have no doubt ... the Kiwi, the Digger, the Tommy ... asked as they slugged it out.

Well, today we remember our fallen ... and the great challenges ... which confronted them.

Moving on, my mind also takes me through the years to **El Alamein** where it was said that all one needed to mention ... was that they were at El Alamein ... and fought with the mighty Eighth Army under Montgomery.

Nothing else was required ... because such was the respect and admiration ... rightly attributed to our soldiers of that campaign.

You will have memories as well. The Battle for **Crete** in May 1941 ... was one of the most dramatic battles of the Second World War.

Over 7500 New Zealanders, along with British, Australian, and Greek troops, tried to fight off a huge German airborne attack; and they almost succeeded.

There were 671 New Zealanders among the dead, and 2180 were taken as prisoners of war.

And we remember the fateful days at **Arnhem** - where surrounded by thousands of dead British paratroopers is a New Zealand chaplain, James Irwin, a young Anglican priest from Christchurch, who joined Britain's elite airborne forces and died with them.

It was estimated over a 9-day period 8000 died or were captured out of the 10,000 who parachuted into Arnhem.

Our memory must move from the European theatre to the Pacific.

We remember the fall of **Singapore** and incarceration of 100,000 Allied troops by the Japanese. We recall their heroism ... and suffering ... which was beyond human telling.

We remember the Expeditionary Force fighting its way through the **Pacific** in those fearful days of World War Two.

We remember the 17 New Zealand Coastwatchers beheaded in **Kiribati** in 1942.

We remember those who died in **Korea, Borneo, Vietnam**.

We also recall the many years of peacemaking and peacekeeping – in **Bosnia, East Timor**, and **Afghanistan**.

One could go on, but allow me to give a final vignette, the battle for **Monte Casino**.

Several years ago, the Royal New Zealand Air Force flew a good number of veterans, politicians, and media to St Benedict's monastery at Monte Casino in the Italian countryside.

It was the 60th anniversary of that titanic battle. In fact, there were four battles and the New Zealand Division, under Freyburg, led the 3rd, and some say the most difficult battle.

The monastery at Monte Casino is a potent symbol on an isolated hilltop. For centuries it was a centre of Christian inspiration and expansion.

Yet for many who endured the ferocious battles in its shadow ... it signified something quite different: it was a cauldron of war.

Over a six-month period ... in excess of a quarter of a million men ... were killed or wounded.

Because it was here the German Wehrmacht made its stand against the Allied advance on Rome in 1944.

Today, ladies and gentleman, we remember our fallen. We remember their courage, their devotion to duty, and their sacrifice.

SECONDLY, WE REMEMBER OUR DUTY

Our third scripture reading today reminds Christian men and women of their responsibility to uphold civic duties. From 1 Peter 2:

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.....17 Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king.

Of course, Peter was assuming the authority he is exhorting us to respect, and indeed to submit, is acting justly for the good of the whole.

I grant you it becomes a little more problematic for the Christian ... when the authorities appear to be acting unjustly.

For example, Reverend James Chisholm, who wrote the magnificent book - Fifty Years Syne - commemorating the life and growth of Otago, alludes to this difficulty.

The pioneering Scottish colonists of this province fled the Disruption in Scotland of 1843 because of Church and State conflict.

Chisholm recalls the stirring voice of Andrew Melville ... from an earlier age ... who took a strong stand against the State when he addressed the King saying,

"Sir, I must tell you there are two Kings and two Kingdoms in Scotland. There is King James, the head of the Commonwealth, and there is Jesus Christ, the head of the Church, whose subject James the VI is, and in whose Kingdom he is not a King, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member. We will yield you your place, and give you all due obedience, but again I say, you are not the head of the Church" (p26).

So, there are times when Church and State are on a collision course and the Bible never exhorts us to submit and to obey in every circumstance.

And of course, irrespective of one's spiritual allegiance ... public debate on matters of defence and foreign policy ... is fundamental to a healthy democracy.

In this light ... it is so heartening to see the strong public debate ... on some of the issues confronting New Zealand today.

It is not soldiers, sailors and airmen who go to war, but it is the nation; our military are the instruments ... of a political decision ... made by the government of the day.

And the church ... and indeed all Christian people ... have a vital and rightful place ... in any national debate ... on all domestic issues ... and especially on issues of war and peace.

And ... it is because of this type of public discourse ... I believe Scripture's imperative to submit, to support and to honour those who govern the nation ... will be well received.

Now, I know and accept ... that some will view things quite differently.

However, I believe ... at the personal level ... the strong command of Christ to forgive our enemy and do good to those who hate us ... has to be balanced at the corporate level ... by the State's responsibility to uphold justice ... if need be ... by the use of force.

Service in the military is, therefore, in my opinion, an important and honourable profession ... for all ... including Christians.

Someone has written:

It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press.

It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech.

It is the soldier, not the student activist, who has given us the freedom to demonstrate.

It is the soldier, not the lawyer, who has given us the right for a fair trial.

It is the soldier who salutes the flag, who serves under the flag, and whose coffin is draped by the flag.

The soldier who permits the protester even to burn the flag.

So, as we commemorate ... Remembrance Sunday ... we also remember our duty:

- to support and to honour good government
- to engage in public debate on vital issues
- to show devotion to duty
- to be courageous
- and to sacrifice
- which will include for some ... the profession of arms

AND FINALLY, NOW WE REMEMBER GOD

Look about you. Do you not marvel at the beauty of creation ... noted particularly in the change of seasons?

Or in Otago's clear still night ... look upwards ... to the extraordinary display of the moon ... planets ... stars ... and the galaxies.

Well, our eyes must now lift from the fallen ... and from ourselves ... to God, the Creator and Redeemer ... who is eternal ...and almighty.

1 Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

25 "To whom will you compare me?

Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.

26 Lift your eyes and look to the heavens.

You see, God is not only transcendent and totally other ... but God has revealed himself ...in Jesus Christ ... and is truly present today ... in the Holy Spirit.

If you want to see the face of God ... look into the face of Christ.

If you desire to know his presence ... learn about the Holy Spirit.

So, God is here, he is with us now.

A young soldier wrote:

**Look God I have never spoken to you.
But now – I want to say, “How do you do.”**

**You see, God, they told me you didn’t exist,
And like a fool – I believed all of this.**

**Last night from a shell hole I saw your sky,
I figured right then they had told me a lie.**

**Had I taken time to see things you had made,
I’d known they weren’t calling a spade a spade.**

**I wonder God if you’d shake my hand.
Somehow, I feel you would understand.**

**Funny – I had to come to this hellish place,
Before I had time to see your face.**

**Well, I guess there isn’t much more to say.
But I am sure glad God, I met you today.**

**I guess the zero hour will soon be here.
But I am not afraid since I know you are here.**

The signal! Well God, I'll have to go.

I like you lots this I want you to know.

Look, now – this will be a horrible fight,

Who knows – I may come to your house tonight.

Though I wasn't friendly with you before,

I wonder, God, if you would wait at your door?

Look, I am crying, me – shedding tears,

I wish I had known you these many years.

Well, I will have to go now, God, goodbye.

Strange – since I met you – I'm not afraid to die.

This poem was found on the body of a dead soldier in Italy during the Second World War.

Friends, nations rise and fall. Tyrants come and go.

But it is my absolute conviction ... that if we live by God's law ... are ruled by his love ... and trust him for our very lives ... then God will come from eternity ... into time.

From the realms of glory, even to the agony of the battlefield.

Our lives, our nation, and our civilisation ... will be touched by God. God will dwell with us.

Arguably one of New Zealand's greatest military commanders was **Air Chief Marshal Sir Keith Park** ... who took command of No.11 Group RAF ... and was

responsible for the fighter defence of London ... and the southeast of England ... during the Battle of Britain.

You will recall a magnificent statue of him was unveiled in London several years ago.

And it was at a ... Battle of Britain Remembrance Service ... in St Paul's Cathedral in London ... that I heard this passage from Isaiah.

Clearly it had been an inspiration to a former generation.

28 Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

**The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.**

**He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.**

**29 He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.**

**30 Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;**

**31 but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.**

**They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.**

SO, TO CONCLUDE

Today we remember the courage, devotion to duty, and the sacrifice of our fallen.

Secondly, we remember our duty to uphold justice and support the nation state.

Finally, I exhort you to look above ... and beyond ... to the eternal ... and remember God.

AMEN.