

# Life-style choice

Remembrance Sunday 2023

Psalm 144

Matthew 5:43-end

If you're going to have an army, have one that prays like King David. Psalm 144 is his song as Military Leader. It is hard to read if we are uneasy about military conflict, but if we stay with it we may find it gives us a way of praying for those involved. We are all involved, of course, directly or indirectly, for example through our taxes supplying arms to Ukraine, something the majority of us, even in this church with historic pacifist leanings, probably support. But surely we recoil a little at the opening image of God training fingers for battle.

Let us take time to walk slowly through the Psalm, seeing how it prompts us to pray. Images of the wholesale destruction of Gaza might beg the question: what might it look like if God trained the fingers of modern armies? Could skill in warfare mean God given precision and the saving of civilian life? David remembers his humanity, riffing on another psalm, Psalm 8, he asks "What are humans that you regard them; or mortals that you think of them?". Remembering our smallness as human beings helps us remember the vulnerable humanity of *all*, enemies and friends alike. David is emphatically not declaring himself invincible.

David reminds himself that his armour is not the only protection he needs. His weapons will not protect his soul. Calling God his shield and fortress and stronghold subverts his own militarism, asserting that if he is going to fight, his soul needs protection of a different order.

This soldier *is* angry about his enemy and calls out their lies, as both sides do angrily in Israel and Gaza; as the West does of Putin's fantasies. But one evil of the present conflict is that they want to stay angry, and keep making the other angry.

In his next breath, David says he would rather his skilled fingers were playing the lute in worship than using weapons. Such exquisite regretfulness is healthy in a soldier, and in a nation, though probably very hard for them to bear. This prompts us to pray for the humanity of all combatants, and protection from hardness of heart and uncontrolled rage.

Then, David lets his imagination develop even further, picturing in more detail what should happen after the conflict: peaceful flourishing for all the children, flocks, fields. No more cries of distress. He reminds us to pray for Palestinians and Israelis and every nation diplomatically engaged to begin to imagine life after conflict and therefore the steps necessary to get to that place of flourishing. Unbearably resonant is his imagining "no more exile." Dare we imagine Palestinian prisoners from Israel and Israeli hostages in Gaza returning home?

Now imagine Jesus, holding back tears having heard this hugely moving soldier's prayer, taking his hand and saying to David, 'now take the next step with me.' His hard edged teaching in Matthew daringly takes this game-changing soldier's prayer a stage further, to where they might begin imagining their enemies' children flourishing, just like their own, standing in upright dignity, pillars of their society. Even when you are still angry at your enemy, even when still engaged in conflict, if you can begin to imagine the reconstruction, the flourishing of the next generation on both sides, and the steps that lead to it, you are in the realm of forgiving enemies.

This is not fantasy. This is tough prayer. This is godly realism. It is a world away from Hamas' gangsterism and Israel's fear-induced bullying. The Israeli hostage's Shalom which we honoured last week is where a future without "cries of distress" will germinate.

The march yesterday helped hold the blood spattered Kibbutz and the rubble of Gaza in view as we dwell on past conflict. Remembrance weekend meanwhile helps us keep the rebuilt cities of Dresden and Coventry in view; keep the once impossible friendships across Europe in view as we feel near despair today. There could not be a more fitting weekend for a march expressing common vulnerable humanity and imagining steps that may lead to peace. To debase Remembrance into mere nationalistic nostalgia is deeply, deeply disrespectful. To use high office to underwrite and lend respectability to prejudice and racism is an insult to any who struggled against Nazism. It is to bleed away the meaning of the sacrifices on which freedom is built.

We can choose to stoke bitterness and resentment; we can choose to stir prejudice and stoke anger; we can choose to engage in dog whistling to people's ugliest aspect for the sake of some political career fantasy; we can choose to behave in a way that, sure enough lures the likes of EDL back onto the streets, claiming the flag of St George. Or we can choose the spirituality, courage and life giving imagination of David. We can choose to prepare our heart and soul for the even more radical imagination of Jesus. Bitterness or hope. Resentment or worship. Death or life. That, Home Secretary, is what you might call a life-style choice.