

Remembering war and building peace

An all-age service to commemorate the First World War

Background

The year 2014 marks the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, and over the next five years significant events of that conflict will be commemorated. This service offers a biblical context in which to begin our reflections on a long and epoch-making conflict, in which not just the countries of Europe, but most of the world, were embroiled.

The biblical context of the service

Set within a context of God's greatness and majesty, the story of Joshua is the prime inspiration for this act of worship. The invasion of Canaan, resting on the belief that God promises the land to the Israelites, offers a context to reflect on the outbreak of the First World War, weighing opposition to an aggressor against the terrible destruction that was visited upon soldiers and civilians, livelihoods and lands. Both Britain and Germany (and many, but by no means all, of the other nations involved) were 'Christian countries' and promoted the idea that God was on their side.

Hymns and songs

And everyone beneath the vine and the fig tree
 Be bold, be strong, for the Lord your God is with you
 For the healing of the nations
 God of grace and God of glory
 He who would valiant be
 Let there be peace on earth
 Lord for the years
 Make me a channel of your peace
 Peace is flowing like a river
 Spirit of peace, come to your waiting world

Introduction

The occasions at which these resources are used will differ to suit local interests and contexts. We suggest you prepare an introduction to suit your situation.

Gather

Prepare the space

As they arrive, give each member of the congregation an envelope containing a cut-out coin shape with a cross marked on it (or a 2p coin), a pencil, a postcard, a white feather, and a Lego™ brick.

Call to worship

The Lord spoke to Joshua, son of Nun:
 'I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you'.

Gathering activity

When British men joined the army, they were paid a sum of money called 'the King's shilling'. Invite everyone to hold the 'coin' they were given as they arrived and to offer themselves in worship to God, the heavenly King, in the following prayer.

Gathering prayer

God, our heavenly King,
 you made each one of us to be like you
 and blessed us with the rich and fruitful earth.
 You gave humanity responsibility
 for the good ordering and wellbeing of the world.
 Inspire us to work for a world of peace and justice
 where all may experience the power of your love.
Amen.

A hymn or song

Open the Word

Reading Joshua 1.1-9 *God's Commission to Joshua*

After the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua, son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying 'My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.'

A response

Lord God, you promised Joshua
 that you would always be with him.
Be with us today.
 Lord God, you told Joshua to be brave and strong.
Be with us today.
 Lord God, you said,
 'Don't be discouraged or afraid'.
Be with us today.
 Lord God, you said,
 'Hear my words when you worship'.
Be with us today.

A hymn or song



Voices of 1914-1918

Wartime letters

We offer here words from wartime letters found and collated by the Caddington Local History Group. You might use letters in the possession of your own local families or material found in literature. Invite a variety of people to read the material you select, to reflect the diversity of those caught up in the global conflict.

10 April 1917

Dear Florrie The weather here is also very rough and snowy. Today is very rough, hail and snow storms but I am off work today so I am quite comfortable in the old hut. I got mum's parcel with the chocs and plum pudding last night, so I am going to hot up a slice presently and put some milk on - it will be extra nice.

26 October 1917

As I hinted in my last letter we have been on the move so that I could not get a letter through for a day or two. I can tell you that the marching about with everything to carry is no joke. We had a short train ride then a fairly long march to another old village and quite a different part of the country. The weather just now is abominable - wet and miserable. Yesterday I was one of a party working for an old French farmer.

A letter from a vicar to one of his parishioners at the front:

Your mother always finishes any news about the war with the remark 'I wish it were all over' - a common remark, but she says it in such a tone that it resembles a prayer.

Letters from John Swain and his family and the Revd William Duckworth © Caddhist Local History Group. Used with permission.

A hymn or song

Reading Isaiah 49.13-19

Divide the congregation into two parts:

A: the voice of the prophet, and B: the cry of the people.

- A** Sing heavens, shout for joy, earth!
Let the mountains burst into song!
The Lord will comfort his people,
he will have pity on his suffering people.
- B** **The Lord has abandoned us! He has forgotten us.**
- A** Can a woman forget her own baby,
and not love the child she bore?
Even if a mother should forget her child,
I will never forget you.
- B** **The Lord has abandoned us! He has forgotten us.**
- A** Jerusalem, I can never forget you!
I have written your name on the palms of my hands.
- B** **The Lord has abandoned us! He has forgotten us.**
- A** Those who will rebuild you are coming soon,
and those who destroyed you will leave.
Look around and see what is happening!
Your people are assembling. They are coming home.

Taken from the Good News Bible

Explore the reading

The leader may use these ideas to develop a short talk or reflection.

- This reading from Isaiah deals with many of the themes that commemoration of the War will consider: the God who comforts a suffering people; the reaction of many to the hypocrisy of presuming that God was on their side; the women who waited, often doing jobs that men had done, writing letters and praying that they would be safe; the God who knows each of us individually; the rebuilding of the world and the return of the few.
- Those who went as soldiers were soon caught up in appalling conditions - cold, wet, sticky mud; beating hot sun; no place for proper rest; endless violence. Those who refused to fight were badly treated; white feathers were given to those who did not join the army; those who ran away were shot for cowardice. Many countries became involved, far beyond Europe: this was the first world war. Empires fell: the map of the world was redrawn. The validity of the war was questioned as men faced each other across enemy lines. Animals and the natural landscape suffered too: horses were used in battles, pigeons carried messages; vast areas of land were turned into barren wastes. Left at home, many women learned 'men's jobs' but they were anxious for the safety of those they loved. Nevertheless expectations about women's roles changed.
- Some people said that this was the war to end all wars but wars continue today. The words of the prophet Isaiah remind us that the world has suffered from wars for thousands of years. An early story of two brothers, Cain and Abel, describes greed, bloodshed and violence. The exile of the Jews in Babylon demonstrates the destruction of a small nation by a superpower. Even Jesus' words remind us that following him will bring us into conflict with those around us (Matthew 10.34), and his own death was violent (Luke 22.50). Jesus himself was honest about the reality of war and its horrors (Mark 13.7-8).

- Amid all this is the longing for peace, so that people can build homes safely and raise children in security, in communities where everyone is valued equally. Our task, as we commemorate the terrible events we shall remember over the coming five years, is to work for a world of peace, where all have a share of the resources, where people care for one another and where the kingdom comes because love triumphs.

A hymn or song

Respond to the Word

Letter writing

During the First World War millions of letters were written. Soldiers wanted to tell their families about the way the war was affecting them, yet they didn't want to worry them. Censorship ensured that they didn't give away military secrets and often they wished to protect their families from knowing how awful their lives were. They wanted to express their love for those at home, and to keep alive hope that they would soon return.

On the postcards given out as they arrived, invite people to write a very short letter:

- describing something ordinary in their life today;
- about something they think is unjust or difficult;
- about a hope for the future.

As the letters are written, play some suitable music. *The Lark Ascending* by Vaughan Williams (readily downloadable) would be appropriate. When the letters are complete, invite everyone to build 'A wall of justice and hope' by bringing them forward to attach to a wall or board.

Prayers

A prayer for those afflicted by war

Lord Jesus, you knew the loneliness of fear:
hold in your hand those who fear for their lives,
those who live in places of violence.

Help us to bring comfort to the oppressed,
and compassion to those who suffer,
so they may hear the song of love
which triumphs over evil.

Amen.

A prayer for forgiveness

Lord God, we come to you in sorrow and sadness.
Forgive us for the part we play in a world
which is greedy for land, resources and possessions;
forgive us when we fail to reach out with friendship and
acceptance;

forgive us when we long for status
and fail to put the needs of others first;
forgive our support of might instead of right,
aggression instead of reconciliation.

Forgive us when we take the easy way out,
instead of valiantly standing for truth and justice.

Amen.

A prayer for peace

Invite the congregation to hold in the palm of their hands the white feather they were given on arrival. White feathers were given to those who did not volunteer. They were an accusation of cowardice. We acknowledge this harsh treatment. But white feathers remind us, too, of doves, a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit, you hovered over the world
as order came from chaos.

Bring order to the chaos of this world.

Send us peace.

Holy Spirit, you came to the disciples
gathered in fear in the Upper Room.

Inspire and excite us when we are faced with change.

Send us peace.

Holy Spirit, you enabled the disciples
to speak in many languages.

Give us gifts of communication across the nations.

Send us peace.

Holy Spirit, giver of life and love,
help us to build your Church, and your world,
with the gifts of gentleness, self-control, love, joy and peace.

Amen.

The prayers may conclude with the Lord's Prayer.

A hymn or song

Send out

Live in faith

Invite people to take home the Lego™ brick as a reminder that they are in God's service building peace.

Pray

Be strong, be courageous.
Children of all nations,
you are one family of love and hope,
led home by God who will be with you
wherever you go.

We go, to serve the Lord.

He is our God. Amen.

This service has been written by the Revd Ruth Pyke, who is the Children's Work Adviser in the Diocese of St Albans.

Resources to enrich worship & learning with:

- adults
- children
- all ages
- young people
- families



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