Remembrance Sunday 2021

On 11th September 2001 Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, was in New York addressing a group of church leaders when terrorists flew two airliners into the Twin Towers of World Trade Centre.

The buildings collapsed sending a huge cloud of dust through the city.  The archbishop and the other leaders were trapped in the building and thought they were going to suffocate because of the thickness of the dust cloud that had enveloped everything.   After an hour or so a fireman came to lead the group to safety.

Dr Williams tells of a conversation he had with someone as he walked away from the disaster through the streets.  The individual did not know that he was the Archbishop and they casually said ‘how can God let this happen?’.

After the event Dr Williams reflected that this was not the work of God.  That this was the work of bad men whose hearts were filled with hate and rage.

That question “Where is God in all of this” was a very common question for troops in the trenches fighting in the two world wars.   It felt like hell.  In one sense it was hard to believe in a God that could let all of this happen but in another sense when they were living so close to death that for themselves they did believe in God.  A friend of mine was an army chaplain and spent some time under fire in Afghanistan.  He commented that there are no atheists in a battlefield.

This is a Big Question.  God is involved in our world, we see that and know it.  But he does not intervene to stop every bad thing happening.  Of course we would also want God to stop an innocent young person dying of cancer.  We would want God to stop a car crash where a loved one of ours is injured or killed.  God would be very busy saving us from the everyday effects of living in a modern world.

Well, we read in the Bible that one day He will indeed wrap everything up and bring this world and its suffering to an end.   In the meantime, however we as the people of God we are to live as light and love in a dark and suffering world.

And this does not mean we do not pray for peace and an end to suffering and injustice in our world.   On the 4th August 1918 the king of England called upon the nation to pray for peace.  100 days after his broadcast the armistice was signed and WW1 was at an end.  That was 11th November 1918 and on the 100th anniversary a few years ago, many Churches picked that theme and entered 100 days of prayer for peace between 4th August and 11th November.

But we mean ‘peace’ in its very broadest sense …

  Peace between nations, so that wars will cease

  Peace between tribes and different groups within nations

  Peace within cities, between rival gangs

  Peace within families – latest figures out just the other week of the number of family breakups in the UK

And our part.  Peace in our world starts with peace in our own hearts.  We want God to bring peace in our world, we want other people to be at peace, but we do not have peace in our own hearts.  We are part of the problem not the solution

So Rowan Williams being the sort of chap he is wrote a book about his experience in New York in 2001.  He called it ‘Writing in the Dust’.  Reflecting on the experience and response of Jesus when they brought a woman to him in the temple who had been caught in adultery.  Jesus does not excuse her, but his focus was on those who had brought her.   Jesus was looking for the way through this that expressed reconciliation grace and love.  And Rowan related Jesus’ actions to the events and the dust in New York that day.

I visited ground zero two years after the event and was overwhelmed by the sense of grief and sadness in the place.  It brought home to me how hard it is to know how to respond to those who committed that atrocity in a way that does not draw our own hearts into anger, rage and hate.

It appears that despite two world wars we seem to have learned nothing.

So this Sunday we have our 2 minute silence to remember those who fought and died in the two great world wars and in the conflicts around the world since.  We remember their sacrifice and we pray for an end to the hate and rage in men’s hearts that leads to wars in the first place.