

Remembrance Sunday

10.11.2019
By Janet Foggie

Introduction

Micah was prophesying around 700 years before the birth of Jesus. He was speaking into a politically volatile situation for an agrarian economy in which people were tied to the soil but also to political leaders, especially the kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. He witnessed the devastation caused by Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701BC.

Can we read his text thinking of the Iron Age in which Micah lived, and also of our own high tech wars and warfare. What has changed? And what has remained the same?

Text

In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
and many nations shall come and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.
For all the peoples walk,
each in the name of its god,
but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God
forever and ever.
In that day, says the Lord,
I will assemble the lame
and gather those who have been driven away,
and those whom I have afflicted.
The lame I will make the remnant,

and those who were cast off, a strong nation;
and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion
now and forevermore.

And you, O tower of the flock,
hill of daughter Zion,
to you it shall come,
the former dominion shall come,
the sovereignty of daughter Jerusalem.

Comment

I wonder, when reading these verses, if Micah coined the idea of beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks? The warfare of sword and spear has become the stuff of legend, romanticised in TV dramas and movies alike. The idea that the soldier might return to the land which he farmed and make farm tools of his weapons is a strong metaphor for the life-altering impact of combat. Even in Micah's day, I am not sure that it was possible to make a decent ploughshare out of a sword, but the beauty in the poetic description suggests the repurposing of a weapon of war for peace.

Modern warfare is a long way from the swords and spears of which Micah wrote, the impact of warfare has never been greater in the modern day, the horrors of the first world war, the genocide of Auschwitz in the second, and the damage of carpet bombing today, shows how much pain and injury we can inflict on each other in the name of political goals or for national aggrandisement.

I wonder if one part of Micah's metaphor that we might rework usefully for today is the work it takes to remould a spear into a pruning hook. When a soldier returns from a modern conflict he carries with him the memories and experiences of that event. We are now much more sensitive to the very real issues of PTSD and other aspects of soldier welfare than we were, but still there are men who need help, psychosocially and physically, to recover from the impact of war.

If war has such a damaging impact on the soldier, then so much more so on the civilian. The impact of the second world war on the civilian communities of Europe was deep and far reaching. The bombing of Dresden and Coventry have led to peace centres being built in each, a sword into a ploughshare in the modern day. The Holocaust Educational Trust educates thousands of British school students every year about the realities of the genocide in the death camps.

For many the metaphor of farming, of producing food, and living on the land, is the natural opposite to the destruction of war. Tending poultry and livestock, growing food, and living in harmony with nature is the picture of peace which Micah describes. Farming is also a hard life, and the challenges of caring for plants and animals can be a great therapy in the face of PTSD and other mental health issues.

It may be some 2700 years since Micah wrote his poem of peace and justice, yet it seems it is as relevant as ever today.

Response

What can you do to support people who suffer from the ravages of war? Is there a way to support veterans locally? Or refugees? Or to support the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust?

Prayer

God of the ploughshare,
Bring peace to our fields,
That we may see those ravaged by war,
Reworked, remoulded, made anew
To find fruitful peace within and without
And may we all follow a path of peace,
The rest of our days

AMEN