

## Sermon by Nick Moir – 16 August 2020 - 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

*And truly, the very view itself was a melancholy thing; for those places which were adorned with trees and pleasant gardens, were now become desolate country every way, and its trees were all cut down. Nor could any foreigner that had formerly seen the land and the most beautiful suburbs of the city, and now saw it as a desert, but lament and mourn sadly at so great a change. For the war had laid all signs of beauty quite waste.*

Those words could, I guess, have been written by many a citizen looking on their beloved city ravaged by war. They could have been written by a citizen of Coventry or Dresden or Hiroshima or Nagasaki. Those last two cities were of course those which were destroyed by atomic bombs. As many as 200,000 people lost their lives in those explosions, mostly civilians. It was controversial then and remains so. The justification was and is that it brought an end to the second world war, the far-eastern part of which continued beyond Victory in Europe Day in early May until 75 years ago yesterday.

But the author of my quotation lived longer ago than that. He was writing 1,950 years ago almost to the day. It was his capital city that was being destroyed; he gives the most vivid, graphic and heart-rending account of. He was there – not in the city defending it but with the armed forces that were attacking it not because he did love his country but because he thought its leaders had gone mad and the war they had initiated was misguided.

Our eyewitness's name was Josephus and the city he describes is, of course, Jerusalem.

We're still not sure about Josephus – how much he was a man of principle and wisdom or whether he could just see which side was going to win and so jumped ship at the right time. But he is an extraordinarily well-placed chronicler of the events of the second half of the first century. He tells us that the Roman siege of the city began three days before Passover, back in April AD70 – and therefore Jerusalem was thronged with pilgrims, its population multiplied by several-fold by the volume of visitors. Josephus claims that over 1 million lives were lost in the attack on the city, undoubtedly an exaggeration but the numbers may well have been huge as a large percentage of those who were in the city lost their lives. We may be talking the scale of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And Josephus's view was that it was all so unnecessary. If only they had not been so stubborn, so defiant, so warmongering – it all could have been so different.

Perhaps that's true of the far-eastern conflict too. There was some fear that Japan would never surrender and the misery wreaked was immense. Our war memorial is one small testimony to that. Of the 77 names recorded of those lost in world war 2, over a quarter are buried or memorialised at the war cemeteries in Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar (formerly Burma) and Japan.

Their graves and memorials stand in the shadow of another that takes us back beyond the time of Josephus, a generation before, when another Jewish critic of his country's leaders and strategies approached the city at the same time of year as those later Roman armies. St Luke tells us in today's gospel that this prophetic Jew wept over the city for he saw its destiny and the destiny of its people – 'if thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace!' [If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!].

That Passover, that year, one man died – one man died to save many others, to take upon and into himself all the wrath and cruelty and suffering that human beings inflict upon each other – to stretch out his arms and proclaim to the world a new and better way. We have not always followed it – boy, we have not always followed it, but as long as we look to that cross as our inspiration then there is hope. As we remember all victims of war – and particularly this weekend those who died in the far-eastern arena of the second world war, let us with Christ seek to recognise the things that make for peace – and with all people of good will - seek to pursue them.