**14th November 2021**

**Call to worship**

Through the abundance of your steadfast love,
we will enter your house, O Lord.
We will bow down in the fear of you.
Lead us, Lord, in your righteousness
and make your way straight and clear before us.

We meet this day to glorify God whose power sustains the world

And to remember with thanksgiving those who lived and died in the service of our country

And tyo ask God’s help and blessing that we may be worthy of their sacrifice each day of our life

**A gathering prayer**

God of the country lanes, speeding motorways and city streets,
of twisting paths, straight streets and hidden alleyways,
of the small gate and narrow path,



**A prayer of approach**

Surrounded by memories, near and far,
we come before you, O Lord, our God.
In the middle of turmoil, you offer us peace.
In the middle of conflict, you offer us resolution.
We come before you now to worship.
We know that our future is in your hands,
and that your promises are true.

We ask for provision for our journey,
and to see you walking beside us,
protecting us, encouraging us, loving us.

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Creator of all that is good,
we bring our sorrows, our anguish and distress
for the ways we have failed to show your love,
be it by word, by deed, or by inaction.
So many have given so much of their lives for us
and yet we have failed not only them but you.
Lord God, forgive us we pray.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God is beyond our rivalries and disagreements,
beyond our cruelty and neglect
and God speaks his words to those who truly repent.
My child, I hear your pain, I feel your sorrow, I take your burden;
go, go free from pain, unburdened by sorrow for all that is past,
I forgive you, go in peace, go in love, go in joy.
**Amen.**

**Reading Mark 13.1-8**

**Sermon**

*Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth-pains.*

The call of Jesus at the end of this week’s Gospel passage is to be alert to the signs of the times (the birth pains, Mark 13.8). This apocalyptic chapter of Mark’s Gospel is one which might be overlooked were it not for the challenge of a lectionary. The destruction of the Temple – which did in fact happen in 70CE – was seen, and is still seen, as a major catastrophe for the Jewish people and their religion. We have no single secular or religious focus directly parallel to the Temple for Jews; but what might be seen as similarly catastrophic for our generation and in this century?[[1]](#endnote-1)

There is apocalyptic talk around climate change. Unless greenhouse gas emissions can be cut fast, [we are heading for environmental disaster](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/09/1bn-people-will-suffer-extreme-heat-at-just-2c-heating-say-scientists). Recent unusual weather events across the world are being attributed to global warming. What might increasing extreme weather events be telling us? Might they represent the birth pangs of a new age?

Among the slogans shouted by environmental protesters in Glasgow last weekend was ‘Climate justice now’. The word ‘now’ often appears in protest slogans; the call ‘what do we want?’ followed by a shouted word reflecting a key demand is often followed by the call ‘When do want it?’ to which the answer from the crowd is usually ‘Now’.

The argument for ‘now’ is a natural call in the face of the challenge of climate change. Time really is running out fast if [the goal, enunciated in the COP25 (Paris) Treaty](https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement), of limiting ‘global warming to well below 2°C, preferably to 1.5°C, compared to pre-industrial levels’ is to be achieved. Are we sufficiently attuned to the emphasis in today’s Gospel, and in other places in the New Testament, which call us to read signs of the times and recognise that the time is now?

Many environmental campaigners argue that politicians are too busy protecting their national and political interests and that much of the COP26 process is, in Greta Thunberg’s words, [a mere ‘greenwash festival‘ and a ‘celebration of blah blah blah](https://news.sky.com/video/cop26-greta-thunberg-says-climate-conference-turned-into-greenwash-festival-and-celebration-of-blah-blah-blah-video-12461004)‘. We can only hope and pray that there is some serious intent and dedication to fulfilling the promises being made at COP26.

Of course today is Remembrance Sunday. Remembrance and Armistice Day has been a bit overlooked this year what with Covid pandemic continuing and the COP 26 conference dominating headlines. The health of the Queen and whether she will be at the cenotaph this morning seems to be the main media focus about Remembrance. For many people the service today is especially for those who gave their lives in the world wars of the 20th century and other conflicts.

It is worth remembering that [a hope of those who fought World War I was that it was the ‘war to end wars’](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_war_to_end_war). With the benefit of hindsight, we know that this hope was not fulfilled, partly because the victors imposed punitive terms on the vanquished which then became a rallying cry which underpinned the rise of Nazism in Germany between the wars. The settlement after World War II was less punitive; [the rules-based world order has its roots in that post-war period](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberal_international_order) which saw the creation of the United Nations, of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), of what became the World Trade Organisation, of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and of European Coal and Steel Community (the forerunner of the European Union). Many in the late 1940s and 1950s described these developments in language akin to the notion of ‘birth pangs’ of a new age. Do these peace projects now need to be refreshed? Is that rules-based order undermined by the many local and regional conflicts? Or by the rise of populism? And, if so, how should people of faith respond?

 The most recent conflict was of course in Afghanistan which saw American and British troops being withdrawn at the end of summer in time for the twentieth anniversary the 9/11 attacks on America.

I was reading an article in Christianity Today entitled ‘Was Afghanistan Worthwhile or Wasted?’. They asked Christian and Muslim leaders to give their verdict.[[2]](#endnote-2)

**Mark Tooley, President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy wrote** *This war like all wars reflects human depravity. It’s inevitable and inescapable. And yet we can admire the sacrifice and courage of all—American, Afghan, and various NATO personnel, along with many NGOs—who labored and sacrificed that Afghanistan might escape the ravages of the past. There were many successes: longer lives, greater health, more education, more freedoms—across 20 years. These victories will not be entirely smothered by the Taliban. And we can assume that the church in Afghanistan, however small, has planted seeds whose fruit will be harvested across future generations in ways we cannot imagine.*

**Mariya Dostzadah Goodbrake and her family were once Afghan refugees. She now serves as the executive director of Global FC, an organization that serves refugees in the Kansas City area.:***I am specifically praying for a generation of courage, resilience, and determination to rise up. I believe that the generation that received a taste of liberation and basic dignity will not forget. We serve a God that constantly reminds us to not forget, to remember, to ponder the path we have ventured. My deep prayer is that this generation will not forget the fragrance of democracy but will rise up with courage to defeat the enemy. I pray for supernatural intervention in the hearts of the Afghan people, that kingdom values and principles are miraculously planted as seeds in the soil of Afghanistan, to grow as trees and bear fruit beyond our comprehension. No democracy is built in 20 years. Nothing is wasted.*

*President George W. Bush captured the hearts of Afghans and Americans with a bigger narrative to bring dignity, safety, and security to the Afghan people. This justification for war was far more enduring and sustainable. American soldiers did not stay in Afghanistan for 20 years for revenge on terrorists, they stayed to free the hearts of Afghans to new hope. For Biden to minimize the war to [only] revenge is a slap across the face to those who lost their lives in the war, and the families of soldiers who must ask themselves now, “Was the sacrifice for nothing?”*

**Hurunnessa Fariad is an Afghan American Muslim and the director of outreach for Multi-Faith Neighbors Network, which builds relationships among religious communities in order to reduce suspicion or antagonism.:** *War and invasion shouldn’t be the first answer. Diplomacy and engaging others should be sought out till the very end. We are all inhabitants of this Earth and a war in one place will affect everyone everywhere else. As a Muslim, I can say that we have to stand up and fight for what’s right and morally sound, which is huge in the Christian faith as well. I just feel as Americans, we left most of our sacred tenets when we decided to leave Afghanistan to the reign of the Taliban.*

Whilst our media has focused on the rights of women in Afghanistan as Christians we should also pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ left in that country.

Christian minorities in Afghanistan either are fleeing the country or hunkering down to live in greater secrecy as the Taliban government strengthens its grip on the country.

An estimated 8,000 to 10,000 Christians remain in Afghanistan, a country of about 38 million people that ranks second only to North Korea in its persecution of Christians, according to the 2021 World Watch List from persecution watchdog Open Doors.[[3]](#endnote-3)

International Christian Concern regional manager for South Asia William Stark, “You have kind of this diaspora, if you will, of the Afghan church in a way. But then you also have people who are dedicated to staying, who feel that their calling is to stay in Afghanistan, regardless of the persecution they’ll face.

“They’ve kind of accepted the fact that God has a plan for them, in that God wants a church in Afghanistan, and they want to be members of that church, regardless of the persecution that is likely to come forward and affect them.”

Afghan Christians have avoided detection by blending in with Muslim communities and worshipers, praying to Jesus during daily prayers at mosques and operating house churches of as few as one or two families each.

A Christian army medic who had served in both Iraq and Afghanistan volunteered to serve on the Covid-19 ward in his local hospital. He found it as challenging a place to be as any of the field hospitals he had served in. His daily prayer was that he would be able to be a bearer of the light of Christ in the middle of trauma. Today’s reading, together with Remembrance Sunday stories, offer plenty of scope for reflection on being, and encouraging one another to be, bearers of hope in difficult circumstances, thereby helping others to find pathways through dark times.

I wonder if you find the ‘birth pangs’ metaphor used by Jesus helpful. Of course, if we have not been through the process and experience of childbirth ourselves, our perspective might be different to those who have. But hopefully we can all understand that the metaphor is one that, for most people, speaks of hope in places of pain.

After her mother died (in 2020), the writer and broadcaster Sarah Joseph spoke on BBC Radio 2’s *Pause for Thought* of how the pain that her mother experienced in childbirth gave her life. And she likened this to the pain she felt when her mother died, and how this was a necessary part of her mother leaving this world and entering new or eternal life.

Recent times have been difficult and painful in all sorts of ways for most of us. Indeed, we would probably be here a long time if we tried to list all the different forms of pain and grief that people have experienced over the past year or two. Are we able to find glimmers of hope in those experiences of pain and grief? Are we able to see new things, new possibilities, new pathways in life, emerging in or through them? Admittedly, that can be a very hard thing to do, to achieve – especially if we are facing difficult events for the first time, or they are truly life shattering. But it is God’s promise that we will.

Perhaps we might even be able to say, as Sarah Joseph did in her ‘pause for thought’, that despite the pain these – or at least some of them – were also beautiful days…because of God’s promise.

Mark begins this passage with Jesus talking about a bit of ‘death and mayhem’, and continues with examples of other tough stuff that will take place. But it’s also a passage full of hope, in which Jesus promises his hearers that, for good times to be ‘birthed’, first there needs to be the pain of that birth.

The first time we encounter great difficulty is often a bit of a shock, particularly when we are young and still think everything is bright and rosy. But Jesus is with us; just like he is there with his disciples guiding, cautioning, reassuring and helping them through the most testing times.

In the birth pains of life, on a personal level and on a corporate level and even a national and international level, may God give us hope that they will lead to joy and new life in the purposes of our loving God.

***HYMN: For the Beauty of the Somme*** was written by Pfarrer Martin Henninger, Minister of the Lutherkirche in Frankenthal, and the Revd Dr David Pickering, Minister of Emmanuel URC and Elmers End Free Church, following their joint pilgrimage to the Somme in 2018.

**Roo Stewart, United Reformed Church (URC) Programme Support Officer for Church and Society , and Debs Brooks, wife of the Revd Philip Brooks, URC Secretary for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, have recorded a hymn specially written for Remembrance.**

<https://urc.org.uk/latest-news/3963-remembrance-for-the-beauty-of-the-somme>

A Song of Memory, Hope and Peace

 1. For once beauty of the Somme, rolling hills and fertile fields, singing birds by streams belonged, human life and nature pealed: All creations' voices raised, singing peaceful songs of praise.

2. For the horrors of the Somme, shells and guns and frightened men. Whistles blew a deadly song, noise and cries the loud refrain: Human voices scream and shout: Tommy, Pomme, or Fritz and Kraut. (in 2nd line of the chorus line, the words are said, not sung, music played more staccato)

3. For the memories of the Somme, deathly silence, land laid bare. Back at home the women mourn private wailing, public tear: All creations’ voice falls quiet… …………………………………… (musician only plays 2nd line, fading in volume)

4. For the lessons of the Somme, children come to learn true cost. Swords to ploughs, their new found psalm, youth no more to war be lost: Furrows turn and skylarks sing may God’s peace on earth now ring.

5. Yet, for healing of the Somme, nations must from conflict cease. Love, forgiveness be your song, pray and work, unite in peace: All creations’ voices raise, singing hopeful songs of praise.

Martin Henninger and David Pickering, Written together whilst visiting the Somme, May 2018 Suggested tune: Lucerna Laudoniae, 41 RS, 181 CH4 Scripture references: Vs 1. singing birds by streams belong Psalm 104.12 Vs 3. women mourn, private wailing Jeremiah 31.15 Vs 4. swords to ploughs, Isaiah 2.4b

David Pickering writes

Not only did we travel to the Somme, but when there we travelled through different times. We visited a battlefield where my grandfather’s regiment had served and the grave of a cousin of my grandmother of whom she was very fond and mourned his early death.

And so we found ourselves going back and forward in time. And we were not alone for we saw parties of school children, who like us, were coming to discover and learn.

We also looked forward, and mindful of the many conflicts since the Somme reflected that the lessons of the Somme are not just for history, but today too, and thought that every new leader of a nation should have as part of their induction, a visit to the Somme.

And so the words of the hymn flowed from our journey drawing on the sounds we heard or imagined.

Verse 1 is set in prior to the carnage, when the rolling fields paled with nature’s sounds in time and also g

 Verse 2 moves forward to the horrific cacophony of the war, and then to the heartache of loss in verse 3.

Verse 4 imagined the songs of today’s children and finally verse five looks to a future, and asks the nature of the song that nations must sing, that we may unite in true peace.



**A prayer of thanksgiving**

In the middle of pain and sorrow,
in the middle of recollection and remembrance,
we praise you, O God.
You have been a rock for all who name you as their God;
you are our rock.
You have been a protective father, mother, parent,
enfolding your people in your care.
You have been, in Jesus, the one walking with us,
the one carrying us across the battlefields of life, living and death.
Your Holy Spirit has moved among us,
giving us hope and light, guidance and inspiration.
To you, God of ages, we offer praise and thanksgiving.
**Amen.**



**Prayers of intercession**

*You could lead these prayers using two voices, one to read the bidding and one invite the congregational response using the words:* ‘Show us the pathway…our God’.

*You could also use hand actions in the call and response:*Show us the pathway that leads to life…
(*hold hands out, palms facing up*).
**Defend us, O Lord**(*cross arms over chest/heart*).

As the year turns and darkness casts its shadows
keep us firm in the hope of light to come.

Show us the pathway that leads to life,
for you are our God
**Defend us, O Lord.**

As we remember the people who gave their lives for the freedom of others
and their sacrifices on behalf of future generations,
may we live by their example of duty and courage.

Show us the pathway that leads to life,
for you are our God
**Defend us, O Lord.**

As we face the wounds of history,
reflecting together on the pain caused by war and conflict
and the scars of mistrust and aggression.

Show us the pathway that leads to life,
for you are our God
**Defend us, O Lord.**

We remember all who long for freedom and peace, remembering today:
Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe unjustly detained in Iran;
women terrified by domestic violence;
migrants risking everything in search of a better life,
especially those in desperate circumstances at the Poland-Belarus border
and we ask for a swift and just solution to this crisis.

Show us the pathway that leads to life,
for you are our God
**Defend us, O Lord.**

As the world heads for catastrophic temperature increases
and people shut their ears to the truth
we pray for life-changing courage to act.

Show us the pathway that leads to life,
for you are our God
**Defend us, O Lord.**

We stand together with countries on the frontline of global heating
remembering today the peoples of the Pacific Islands
who are afraid of being swallowed by the rising sea.

Show us the pathway that leads to life,
for you are our God
**Defend us, O Lord.**

We pray for areas of conflict, remembering Myanmar, Sudan and Nigeria.
We pray for peace in all the pain of our broken and troubled world
and for faithful peace-building.

Show us the pathway that leads to life,
for you are our God
**Defend us, O Lord.**

When trust in politics and politicians has been shaken by sleaze and scandal
and leaders do not serve the people,
keep us mindful of your servant kingship.

Show us the pathway that leads to life,
for you are our God
**Defend us, O Lord.**

When many voices compete for our attention;
when we are tempted by easy answers to complex problems
and we are afraid of the cost of following you:

Show us the pathway that leads to life,
for you are our God
**Defend us, O Lord.**

When we watch the suffering of those we love
and long for their healing and release
send your Spirit’s presence to comfort all who are in pain.

Show us the pathway that leads to life,
for you are our God
**Defend us, O Lord.**

As we travel in the company of the saints
and with the memory of all whose faith has inspired our own
we give thanks that we do not travel alone.

Show us the pathway that leads to life,
for you are our God
**Defend us, O Lord.**

**A sending out prayer**

Lord God, source of all love,
from whom every soul has come,
and to whom every soul will return,
help us to hold close the stories of those
who have gone before us,
and to take comfort from their wisdom.
Let their stories tint our daily life with colour,
and give us hope and light to our path.
**Amen.**

1. *Dudley Coates is a local preacher in the Yeovil and Blackmore Vale Methodist Circuit , a former Vice President of the Methodist Conference and was head of environment at the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food from 1996 to 2001.*

<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/116-november-december-2021-b/proper-28/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/august-web-only/afghanistan-christians-prayer-lament-united-states-taliban.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/world/secrecy-only-option-for-christians-left-in-afghanistan/> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)