

Is war ever justified?

Seems a strange question to pose...particularly on Remembrance Sunday – when each year we call to mind the atrocities of two world wars and several dozen other conflicts that have happened since – and some that are still going on.

Today, we pause to remember those men – and women – who gave their lives in war so that others might have a better future. We give thanks to God for their courage. Their willingness to give everything.

‘For our tomorrow, they gave their today’.

And its right that we DO stop, remember – and think how different our lives would be if they’d not made that ultimate sacrifice...

Whether or not we believe that going to war is acceptable, there can’t be many people who would just ignore these thousands of people who died believing they were making a difference. Even the staunch pacifist would spare them a thought...

But there are other wars too.

Wars that don’t involve guns and tanks. Wars that are nothing to do with soldiers, or aeroplanes, or submarines and destroyers.

There’s the war against fear.

Fear is a big factor in so many people’s lives.
Fear of failure. Not wanting to be seen not to achieve what society expects.

Fear of oppression– and yes, that can include the fear of occupation forces in some countries – but it can also include fear of an oppressive person.

As many of you know, I have, for the last 3 years, done admin for social services at Swindon Borough Council as my day job. The content of some of the case notes and court submissions I type up tell of children who are afraid of oppressive parents or family members. They tell of men and women physically and emotionally abused by partners, or ex-partners. Of teenagers so addicted to substances that they’ve been drawn into a fearful web of sex work to fund their habit. And believe me, there is worse.

Fear of poverty. The family where someone loses their job, and wonders where their next meal will come from, or how they’ll pay their bills...

Then of course, there’s the war against illness...

This morning I got up with a full head of hair. At lunchtime, it was all shaved off.

Most of you know I did it as part of Macmillan's Brave the Shave campaign.

This is something that's been running for several months now. With Macmillan being one of the leading charities to support those battling cancer, they deal with lots of people who, through their treatment for their illness, lose much, or all, of their hair.

In having my head shaved today, I'm raising money for Macmillan's work because I believe they do wonderful things to support not only those who are suffering from cancer – but also those who care for them. They are even there for families where sadly the battle was lost and their loved one died – and they're there for as long as they're needed.

But as well as raising much needed funds, I'm also standing alongside those people who have no choice but to go around with a bald head. I'm saying I know that right now, life's rubbish for them, but, I want to be alongside them.

They - matter.

You see, back in the mid 1980's, I declared war on cancer.

In 1979 my lovely dad was diagnosed with it, and within 8 months he was dead. I was 18. He was 57.

It hurt. Big time. But mum and I pulled together and carried on, with the help of family and good friends. And God.

Then five years later, mum was diagnosed with cancer. She was 52.

I was devastated – they said it was terminal right at the start – she'd probably had it for years but had been so busy caring for dad and me that she didn't bother with herself, so it had taken hold.

With the help of some chemotherapy, she lived another 2½ years and died when she was 55.

And yes, during the course of the chemo, she lost quite a lot of her hair.

When mum died I vowed I'd do anything in my power to raise money to defeat this evil disease that claimed both my parents way too young, and to support people going through what I'd gone through when they were ill.

As I said, I declared war on cancer.

As yet, it hasn't surrendered.

Cancer is still here - so the war goes on.

And I'm now fast approaching the age my parents were when they died. So now seemed a good time to do something radical to make a stand and continue the fight.

My inspiration to do the head shave came from Katie – a member of this church – who went through cancer a couple of years ago, just before she got married. Most of you know her.

I was so humbled by her courage. She came here week on week, wearing scarves - or nothing - on her head – and she looked as beautiful like that as she does now her hair is back.

That's because beauty comes from within and she's a beautiful person...

But more than that, she's proof that things have moved on.

Treatments now are so much more advanced that more than 50% of cancer sufferers now survive. That has to be good news.

And this war I declared on it is not my solitary battle. There are thousands and thousands of others doing the same thing, and it's making a difference...

I'd say that kind of war is ok to fight – as is the fight against the sort of things I see happening to people during my day job.

So where's God in all of this?

Where was he in World War 1, when young men were dying in the trenches in France, victims of hideous gas attacks?

Or in World War 2, when so many of his own people went to the gas chambers at Auschwitz?

Where was he in the Falklands....or the Gulf War, where soldiers saw such awful things that some of them are still being treated for the effects of it?

Where is he now in Syria, as thousands of migrants flee for their lives at the hands of ISIS?

Where is he when a young person cowers in her room, listening to her parents fighting – or out of their heads on drugs or drink?

Where is he for the man whose wife has beaten him black and blue – and he has no idea what he's done?

Where is he when the chemo hits hard and hair falls out...

I tolerated losing dad, although it hurt. But when mum died so soon after, I asked God - yelled at him actually - 'where were you when I needed you'

And for a time, there was silence.

But gradually, over several years, he showed me he had been there.

He had walked with me through it all....

I can't put into words HOW he showed me – but I know he did.

Our reading from Romans tonight promises us that whatever battle we're fighting, it can't get between us and God's love for us, because of what he's done for us in sending his Son to us.

Like those we remember today who paid the ultimate sacrifice, so also did God.

As it says in verse 31 'he [who] did not withhold his own son, but gave him up for all of us ...'

As I did what I did today because I want to get alongside those who are in the grip of cancer and tell them they are loved, so God wanted to get alongside his broken and hurting people in the world – so he physically came to them in his Son.

And if we move forward to verse 38 and read to the end of the passage, we can see how what Paul wrote to the Romans in around AD57 is relevant to us today.

Try reading it something like this:

'I am convinced that neither death, nor life – nor gas attacks, nor holocausts, nor cruel dictators....nor abuse, nor fear of punishment or failure...nor cancer...nor bereavement...will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

That is why I'm standing here tonight with no hair.

Because I believe there are some wars we have to fight, be they military or personal.

And I also believe that when we fight those wars, God is right there with us. Feeling our pain, sharing our victories.

One day, we won't need to fight these battles anymore.
Because one day, God will triumph over all evil, sickness, pain and death.

But we're not there yet. The time has not yet come.

So until it does, hold firm to the belief that however tough it gets, nothing can get between us and his love.

The red poppies on the fields in Flanders remind us of the blood that was shed in wars to try to bring an end to suffering and wrong.

The red blood of Christ, poured out for us on the cross, is the promise that the final battle has been won by God and we are safe in him. Ultimately, all the bad things will be defeated and - in the words of Julian of Norwich - all shall be well.

For now, the battles must continue.

But Christ has won the final war.

To God the Father, through the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit, alone be the glory – now and for all eternity.

Amen