On your marks

The annual Remembrance Sunday service at church is often the focus of much debate regarding the inclusion of children.

- Should they be in for all or only part of the service… or not included at all?
- What about the two-minute silence and very young children?
- Will it cause a problem for some who find this service particularly difficult or moving, if children are there?
- Should this be a parade service?
- Is this an opportunity to have an evangelistic theme, given the 'outsiders' who come?
- How formal does it have to be?
- How do we manage the sensibilities of those who have a family member serving in the armed forces with those of Christians who are profoundly opposed to war?
- What will the children make of this service?
- What should we be sharing with them?

Get set

The following idea is an outline for an all-age service for Remembrance Sunday. It is put together on the premise that children do need to experience being part of our special moments of celebration even when those occasions are particularly serious and touch on big questions. In fact, children need the help of our all-togetherness to come to terms with such big questions (i.e. life and death; war and peace); and such services make it more possible to talk them through with our children afterwards, having encountered them within the safe boundaries of the community of faith gathered around a Bible story, prayer and shared worship.

For follow-up with children at home, see *Side by Side with God in Everyday Life* by Yvonne Morris (BRF Ministries, 2011) – in particular, 'A time for death' and 'A time for killing'.

You will need:

- Psalm 46 written out for various groups to read (see below).
- Two or three people of varying ages prepared to be interviewed very briefly as to what Remembrance Sunday means to them (see below).
- A piece of wide, plain white ribbon for everyone present, about 30 cm long; felt pens in a variety of colours; safety pins; some small pegs and a washing line.

Possible hymns and songs may include:

- 'God is our refuge and strength' (to the Dambusters tune!)
- 'A safe stronghold our God is still'
- 'Draw near to God and He'll draw near to you'
- 'Be still and know that I am God'
- 'Lord look into my heart'

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- ‘Make me a channel of your peace’

Go!

1. **Introduction**

Many of the stories of the Old Testament take place within the context of war or the threat of war. Whatever our personal attitudes to war and killing, we cannot avoid the sad truth that this continues to be a fact of life on earth for the human race. It is clearly not God’s plan for us, and there is no doubt that the taking of life is condemned in the Commandments, but consider the following:

- What about self-defence?
- What about peace-making that involves a necessary show of force and the willingness to use it?
- What about the greater threats that would ensue to innocent lives, if evil were allowed to continue unchecked?
- What about the possibility of there being a just war?

These are some of the big questions that we as Christians must face when we come to Remembrance Sunday alongside the compassion we want to express towards those who have died in the world’s many wars, past and present, and towards those who still suffer because of fighting and indiscriminate violence.

In this service, let us ask God to help us remember that peace is better than war; talking is better than fighting; arming ourselves with the weapons of love and prayer is better than bombs and bullets; and compassion for those who suffer is better than indifference and hatred.

2. **A Psalm to read together – Psalm 46**

If possible, project the following up on a screen so that the different verses can be shared out between different groups of voices. Alternatively, write the words large on placards and get them displayed at a height at various places around the worship space.

Men*:* God is our mighty fortress, always ready to help in times of trouble.

Women: And so, we won’t be afraid! Let the earth tremble and the mountains tumble into the deepest sea.

Men and boys: Let the ocean roar and foam, and its raging waves shake the mountains.

Women and girls: A river and its streams bring joy to the city, which is the sacred home of God Most High.

All: God is in that city, and it won’t be shaken. He will help it at dawn.

Teenagers and their leaders: Nations rage! Kingdoms fall! But at the voice of God the earth itself

melts.

Boys and their leaders: The Lord All-Powerful is with us.

Girls and their leaders: The God of Jacob is our fortress.

Boys and girls and their leaders: Come! See the fearsome things the Lord has done on earth.

All: God brings wars to an end all over the world. He breaks the arrows, shatters the spears, and burns the shields.

Worship leader: Our God says, 'Be still, and learn that I am God! All nations on earth will honour me.'

Adults: The LORD All-Powerful is with us.

Children and teenagers: The God of Jacob is our fortress.

3. **A time to say sorry**

If possible, show a series of pictures or photos from both recent wars and the great world wars of the last century – these can be found on the Internet. Include not just the fighting but the hospital work and shots of the emergency services in the case of suicide bombings and terrorism. Show these to the accompaniment of thoughtful music – for example, *Schindler's List*, Barber's *Adagio*.

After this silent viewing, conclude with these responses:

Leader: The Lord says: Change your ways; the Kingdom of God is here.

All: Help us to live differently because we belong to you.

Leader: The Lord says: You shall not commit murder.

All: Help us to live peaceably with all and overcome evil with good.

Leader: The Lord says: Blessings on those who make peace; they will be called his children.

All: Help us to be kind and merciful, and forgive others, just as God has forgiven us because of Jesus.

Leader: The Lord says: Resist evil and stay strong in your faith.

All: Help us to put on all the armour that God gives, so when the battle is over we can still be standing.

Leader: The Lord is merciful. He is kind and patient, and his love never fails. The Lord won't always be angry and point out our sins; he doesn't punish us, as our sins deserve.

All: Thank you that on the cross Christ did away with our hatred of one another and he has made peace between us and God. Amen

Then say: *The Lord's Prayer*

4. **What does Remembrance Sunday mean to you?**

Remembrance Sunday is a special service for many people and for different reasons.

Arrange to interview two or three people of varying ages as to what this service means for them. Testimonies may include: memories of sadness long ago; the assurance of prayers for those they know who are currently involved in fighting; thanksgiving for the peace we enjoy today; a reminder that there is still so much to do to mend God's broken world.

Move into the two-minute silence. As long as this is clearly explained to children, there is usually no problem about keeping quiet for this short period. You might however offer the opportunity for those with very young children/babies of a 'get-out' if they want it, by providing a separate space to which they can retreat discreetly. But aim to make this moment as inclusive as possible. If you can find someone to play the last post on a trumpet or other wind instrument that will help focus everyone's attention along with the laying of a poppy wreathe maybe.

5. **Whole-church activity**

Poppies aren't the only flower that is used for remembrance. In France, after World War I, the cornflower was used; and traditionally the herb rosemary is for remembrance.

And it isn't just flowers. Ribbons are widely used to mark various special charity focus days and also to remember important causes, global injustices and the plight of individuals. Yellow ribbons tied to trees, for example, are often reminders of loved ones who are missing, those who have been captured as the result of conflict and soldiers still on active service.

Here are some others (note that some colours of ribbon have more than one meaning):

- 'Puzzle' ribbon – autism awareness
- Blue ribbon – human trafficking
- Orange ribbon – animal cruelty
- Red ribbon – aids awareness
- Black ribbon – remembrance of a mass killing
- Red and blue ribbon – remembering Haiti
- Red, white and blue ribbon – remember the Omagh bombing

I wonder what sort of coloured ribbon(s) would help us to remember to choose peace not war, compassion not apathy and support for peacekeepers rather than disinterest.

Hand out strips of wide, plain white ribbon along with safety pins and felt pens. Show everyone how the ribbon, once decorated, will be twisted over itself and fixed with the pin to become a ribbon of

remembrance. Invite everyone individually or as a family or friendship group to decide on the colouring and the patterns that should decorate their ribbon to be a special symbol of remembrance for today. For example:

- Camouflage colouring to remember soldiers on active duty.
- Outlines of doves and olive branches to help us remember peace.
- Purple colouring with dark tear drops to speak of sadness.
- Images of sad faces or a broken sword or hands clasping each other…

Groups might also like to think of key words to put on their remembrance ribbons… perhaps Bible verses or imagery.

Give everyone no more than five minutes for this and then invite people to come and attach the various ribbons with a small peg to a line suspended across the front of the worship area, high enough for everyone to see. Comment on the finished products positively and perhaps some may like to come out and say what their ribbon reminds them of.

6. **Reading from James 4:1–10**

7. **Outline for a short talk**

a. War starts in our hearts (James 4:1–3)

When we think of the big questions of war and peace, injury and death, pain and suffering, it is easy to imagine it is a problem ‘out there’ somewhere; to think it is beyond our control and not something that we have caused. However, James, the writer of this very practical letter to Christians, says it’s quite the opposite. He says that wars start with our attitudes to each other and each one of is guilty! He even says it might start with unanswered prayer!

Divide the congregation into four groups to help illustrate this. You will need:

- One group to work out a group mime of looking envious – wanting what others have.
- One group to work out a group mime of looking frustrated.
- One group to work out a group mime of seething anger.
- One group to work out a group mime of violence and fighting.

When they are ready, cue them in, one at a time, to give a visual demonstration of what James says can happen in each one of us.

When they are all up and miming, ‘turn the sound on’ – ask them to add in sound effects and language to go with the mimes!

Resource downloaded from brf.org.uk/resources

b. God cares about our hearts (James 4:6)

The heart of the problem is, as far as God is concerned, the problem of the human heart. Each one of us could potentially start a war!

This is why God has given us his Holy Spirit to live in our hearts. This is possible because Jesus went to war against all that was evil on our behalf on the cross. His coming back to life again makes it possible for us now to be a friend of God's ways, and not the ways of killing, war and death.

Display the word HATE. Explain that God, by the cross of Jesus, longs to change it to LOVE. Do this by crossing out one letter at a time and replacing it as follows:

HATE → GATE → GAVE → GIVE → LIVE → LOVE

James explains that God treats us with kindness and gives grace. He wants his Spirit of peace and compassion to be inside each of us. This will be the way to end wars and put the world back together again. In the meantime the world, like our hearts, will be a battleground, in which we are called to be peacemakers. Sometimes that may even involve a call to arms but most often it calls for a sacrifice.

Ask for two individuals from the last mime group to come up and set up a dramatic freeze-frame (photo still) of a mock fight between them. Now invite another person to come and stand in between these two, stretching out arms in both directions to push them apart. Freeze that image. Now ask the two 'fighters' to step aside and leave the peacemaker frozen in his or her shape. This person will be in the shape of a cross – perhaps distorted but still cross-shaped!

Jesus shows us the way to become peacemakers between others once his Spirit is living in us.

c. Have a heart to heart with God (James 4:7–10)

But none of this 'just happens' says James. We need to say 'no' to evil and 'yes' to God. We need to want to change. We need to come back to God. We need to stop blaming others and look into our own hearts honestly.

One day wars will cease, promises the Bible (Micah 4:1–4). One day we won't have to have poppies or ribbons to remember to care for those who suffer and to be reminded to be different in the future (Revelation 21:4). One day all creation will be at peace (Isaiah 11:6–9). But in the meantime we need our poppies and ribbons to remind ourselves of God's ways.

Invite people to think back to what their ribbon means to them and then to turn that into a quiet prayer of faith, asking God to help each one of them to live by its truth from now on.

8. **Prayers**

There are some suggestions for prayers for the topics of war, peace, suffering and care for others in *Barnabas Children's Prayers*, pp. 102–109.

Resource downloaded from brf.org.uk/resources

There are further ideas for prayerful activities and poems in *Creative Mission*, p. 71ff.

9. **Blessing**

End with a prayer of blessing over the ribbons that have been made, before people come to collect them during the last hymn/song.