

Chemical Warfare

Today, the 30th of November, is designated by the United Nations as a Day of Remembrance for all Victims of Chemical Warfare. It is intended to (I quote) “provide an opportunity to pay tribute to the victims of chemical warfare, as well as to reaffirm the commitment of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to the elimination of the threat of chemical weapons, thereby promoting the goals of peace, security, and multilateralism.” (End of quote)

In this year marking the centenary of the end of the First World War it is important to recall that in that conflict chemical weapons were used on a massive scale, resulting in more than 100,000 deaths and a million casualties. The consequences for those affected were terrible and long-lasting.

At least chemical weapons were not used on the battleground in Europe in the Second World War. And on 29th April 1997 the Chemical Weapons Convention, which had been adopted in 1993, entered into force. It determined (to quote), “for the sake of all mankind, to exclude completely the possibility of the use of chemical weapons.”

In 2013, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize “for its extensive efforts to eliminate chemical weapons”.

That of course is to some extent the theory. For we all know that chemical weapons have been used in a number of more recent conflicts, not least in Syria. Much thus still needs to be done.

War and conflict are by their very nature brutal and cruel. And that has always been the case. What is disturbing is that human ingenuity has been used to create even more deadly and effective weapons. If only that effort could be channelled into inventions that make the world a better, safer and happier place.

Today is the last but one day of the Church’s year. In the last few weeks the daily Bible readings at Morning Prayer have focussed on the visions of Daniel and of the book of Revelation. There one of the common themes has been God’s judgement.

As Christians we rightly proclaim the love, mercy and forgiveness of God. And yet we should not ignore the strong warning of judgement throughout the Old and New Testaments, as we heard in our reading from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 2.1-4).

God’s will is not for war and conflict but for peace and harmony in his world, a world in which weapons are to give way to instruments of peace. For the achievement of that is our continual prayer.

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