

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> November 2019**  
*Micah 4: 1 - 8; Luke 1: 68 - 79*

If you haven't been to the National Museum of Flight at East Fortune in East Lothian, you should go. The old airbase is packed with planes, some of which you can go inside, including Concord.

Sitting in the cockpit of Concord, or in any modern jet is bewildering. In front of you there is a galaxy of instruments, dials, switches, lights and screens. How do pilots know what they all do and mean; how do pilots cope?

Actually, all these dials and switches and screens and lights disguise simplicity. Take for example an aircraft's flight deck navigation map displays. They are models of simplicity, which is in stark contrast with the increasingly detailed and function-laden moving maps that are available in the cabin to passengers on their seatbacks.

Seatback maps, which passengers view as they soar through the sky, have an incredible level of detail. The plane itself is shown above a topographical map of the terrain it is flying over, showing mountain ranges, named cities, even the ocean floor. More than one map is available; others display the darkness of space, the blue of the atmosphere and a curving horizon with the aircraft in-between. Passengers might wonder whether or not the next view will be of their very seat in the plane.

That seatback map is very different to navigation map on the flight deck. In most aircraft the map pilots use has limited detail. The plane is nothing more than a tiny triangle, and the space around it appears as a black void lit up with only a few pin pricks representing radio beacons, nearby aircraft, and the active route the plane is on.

The difference between these two maps – the detailed one available to the passengers and the sparse one pilots see is striking. Passengers want a lot of information and incredible detail so they can understand where they are in the world – perhaps even who they are in the world. Pilots, on the other hand, want to see only information that enables them to fly the plane safely between two points. For them, more information than is necessary could prove distracting or confusing.

That's not to say pilots scorn the passengers' map-view. When passing through the cabin pilots often stop to view those passenger-maps, things of wonder compared to their sparse instrumentation.

I was wondering if the contrast between these two maps might be true also in a military context, when armies and soldiers are fighting a war.

For soldiers in the field, their mental map has to be very detailed and very local: the position of the enemy; the shape of the terrain around them; the location of their comrades. So too must be the mental 'map' they hold of their objectives, tasks and duties, not to mention the second-by-second immediacy of fighting or the hour-by-hour march. Their lives must feel intense, detailed and often short.

On the other hand, the generals at headquarters probably have a different view. Perhaps, they have before them a map of the whole area that the war is being fought over. Their objectives might be understood as country-wide rather than concerned with individual towns and villages. They may be more interested with the movement of entire brigades rather than

the whereabouts of a few soldiers in a platoon. Their timescale for the battle might be measured in weeks and months rather than minutes and hours.

Not that the generals, the best ones anyway, are unconcerned with the soldiers' point of view. I imagine the best generals will sometimes leave the office of HQ and spend some time with the troops in the field in order to understand the conditions in which their men have to fight.

Different again from the generals' map of the war must be the map that the government holds before it. Concerned as they are with the soldiers who are fighting and the generals who are leading, the government must also have to consider the long-term strategy, the relationships with allies, the objectives of the war, and what must be done during the peace that follows. If soldiers measure a war in minutes and hours, and generals measure it in weeks and months, then the government must measure it in years and decades.

Like the generals, I suppose it is equally important that the politicians occasionally leave the capital to experience the war room and the view of the generals, not to mention to listen to the voices of soldiers on the ground in order to understand what is really happening.

From individual soldiers, to generals, to governments, at each stage the view of a war is different - wider and broader as you step back for a broader overview, and more long-term as the conflict is understood at a distance. Standing on the battlefield the war is a step-by-step, minute-by-minute affair; sitting in headquarters it is a mile-by-mile, month-by-month affair; debating in parliament it is a country-by-country, year-by-year event.

When it comes to war the Bible readings this morning help us to see an even wider perspective, and to read of a map much bigger than all the others with a lot less detail than even that of governments. In the Bible we read a map and a perspective that is on a cosmic scale, which lays out not the villages and streets of human life, or the cities and towns, or the countries and continents, nor our minute-by-minute existence, or the year-by-year progress of the battle, but instead we see the whole scope of human history. Rather than the fears and hopes of an individual soldier in a trench, we are presented with the direction and purpose of humanity.

*In the days to come, writes the prophet Micah, ... peoples shall come streaming ... They shall beat their swords in to mattocks and their spears into pruning-knives; nation shall not lift sword against nation nor even again be trained for war...<sup>1</sup>*

Imagine that, nation shall not lift sword against nation. It is not something that is easy to imagine if you are fighting in the trenches. Perhaps, only in their daydreams can generals catch a glimpse of that distant peaceful land on that huge map of human existence where swords and spears will be beaten into farm implements.

Even for governments such a vision of peace must appear so blurred that the road along which people will come streaming towards such a utopia is barely distinguishable.

But that is not the case for God, the great cartographer of humanity. God knows the direction we are headed. And it is a direction that should fill us with hope.

In the trenches or in the headquarters or even in the governments it is difficult to believe in the hope that the Bible records of a world where war is a thing of the past. Of course, it is difficult. It is almost impossible for the soldier in the trench to understand the overall strategy, or the

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 4: 1, 3

general in the war room to appreciate the relationships between entire nations, and it is impossible for us to see clearly the manner by which humanity develops and changes for the better.

That is why we need faith, just as a soldier in the field needs to believe that the generals understand the bigger picture of the battle, and the generals need to believe that the government understands the even bigger picture of alliances and foreign policy, so we need to believe, when we read the words of the prophets, that God knows what humanity as a whole can achieve.

That hope and belief that humanity can be better than it appears when viewed from the ground, is the reason we can with confidence and thanksgiving remember those today who sacrificed their lives in wars they fought for their countries. Yes, it is unspeakably awful that they lost their young lives, and yes, we would rather that they had lived in peaceful days, but we are not there yet. War and conflict are with us still. But, have faith for they will not always be with us.

Just as it helps and encourages soldiers in the field when the generals step out of HQ and walk among them in order to learn what war is like for those soldiers who must fight it face-to-face, minute-by-minute, step-by-step. And, just as it helps and encourages the generals when the politicians fly out from the capital to visit the front and learn what war is like when fought over an entire battlefield. So, it is important that God steps out of his heaven and away from his cosmic map to join us here on the ground in our day-today lives to see and understand the struggles we face as we try, with his guidance, to build a better world, year-on-year, and better lives for our children so that they need not fight wars as our grandparents did.

That is why the Good News is important, the Good News that in Jesus Christ God did step away from the cosmic map to spend time on the ground living the lives human beings have to live. The Good News is that God is not remote and indifferent in heaven, but has spent time here on earth to suffer as we do; to suffer for love so that we can understand the overall strategy, that - step by step, inch by inch - the world can turn towards peace, a peace built on the sacrifices we make to love one another.

Which is why, when he heard that Elizabeth his wife was pregnant with John the Baptist, Zechariah burst into song at the promise that Jesus Christ would live on earth to love us and to show us how to live – and to turn the world towards peace and justice,

*Praise to the God of Israel! For he has turned to his people, saved them and set them free ... And you, my child, you shall be called the Prophet of the Highest for you will be the Lord's forerunner, to prepare his way and lead his people to salvation ... for in the tender compassion of our God the morning sun from heaven will rise upon us, to shine in those who live in darkness, under the cloud of death, and to guide our feet in to the way of peace.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1; 68, 76, 78 - 79