

Sermon for Remembrance Sunday, 14th November 2010 (33rd Sunday of the Year, Year 'C')

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the time corresponding with my first years at secondary school, there was a serious question as to whether Remembrance Sunday would survive. It was not uncommon to hear it argued that the whole machinery of the laying of wreaths at the Cenotaph and the parade of veterans should be abandoned; that the rituals of Remembrance Sunday kept us, as a nation and as a people, unhelpfully tied to the past, and trapped in an outmoded view of the world. The ceremonies meant nothing to the young, it was said; and even, that they glorified war.

Nobody, I think, argues this way today. Two wars in the Gulf, the invasion of Iraq and the conflict which followed the toppling of Saddam and his regime – longer and bloodier by far than anyone had anticipated or prepared for – and the campaign in Afghanistan which continues to this day, all of these have forcibly impressed upon our minds the suffering which accompanies armed combat, the sacrifice of those who give life and limb in our name, and the need for a public act of penitence, recollection and thanksgiving. And as we have got used, horribly used once again, as we should not be, to images of coffins being ceremonially disembarked from aircraft and driven slowly through the towns and villages of our nation, not least in this county, and of the reality of seeing, hearing, knowing servicemen with shocking injuries, maimed and disfigured for life, so we have responded with a renewed and deepened appreciation of the human cost of the battles of ages past: the Great War, now slipped from living memory into the pages of the history books; the Second World War, still part of the experience of a generation among us, though even here the numbers who knew the battle at first hand grow fewer, as they must; the many other theatres of conflict in which, year after year, the Forces of the Crown have been committed. One hundred British servicemen have been killed in Afghanistan since this day a year ago. Forty six million poppies have been sold this Remembrance-tide. One must resist the temptation to speak for others, but it seems beyond doubt that, for those now at school and at university, as for every other generation, the scepticism about Remembrance with which my generation flirted has gone.

How glad we should be of this. It was Henry Chadwick who remarked that nothing is so much to be pitied as a church which has lost its memory; and today especially we might reflect that what is true of the church is equally true of a nation. If we do not remember where we have come from, we will not know who we are. Remembrance Sunday says something vital about our sense of identity, our sense of mutual belonging: not only with those around us, but with those who have gone before – and those who are yet to come after us. We do not live in a kind of perpetual Year Zero; we are bound together with our forebears and with our children, including those yet unborn. Our obligation to honour the memory

of those who have gone before us, especially those whose lives have been drastically foreshortened in war, is all of a piece with our obligation to preserve for future generations the kind of society which has been nurtured in this land over many generations, and which we have received on trust: a society which is indivisible from its Christian origins and culture, however obscured those origins and that culture appear for so much of the time.

Few things speak so eloquently of that Christian character, that Christian *ethos*, on this day when we remember the war dead of this land, than the institution of the monarchy, and the part played by the monarch in the national Act of Remembrance. I do not mean the personal fidelity and devotion to duty of our present Queen, universally attested as they are. Rather it is the fact that the monarch is for us *both* the source of all authority – however vestigially and symbolically, but nonetheless vitally – *and* God's servant first, owing all authority to Him, that is significant. How wisely we speak of the Forces *of the Crown*, reminding us that our soldiers, sailors and airmen can never be the playthings of mere politicians. Instead, that phrase insists – and I will try to pick my words very carefully here – that there is something sacred about committing forces to combat. *Of course* I do not mean that God fights for the English, or that there is something glorious about being killed in battle, both attitudes which the Church of England promoted with gusto at the beginning of World War I, until the reality of the horrors of the trenches began to sink in. Rather, I mean to suggest that sending men and women into battle – and that means, almost always, young men and women, as often younger than the youngest people here – is so terrible a thing to do, that we only dare do it all with that humility which comes from knowing that all our actions stand under the judgment of God, who is both justice and mercy.

The Scriptures which the Church appoints for public reading at this time of the year often speak of war and tumult, of the passing away of familiar and comfortable things – indeed, of the end of the ages, the swallowing up of this world and the whole of creation at the *eschaton*, the End, which is both terrible and glorious. Today's Gospel is no exception, as S Luke speaks of the destruction of the Temple and of the betrayal, persecution, imprisonment, torture and even death of the Lord's disciples, and all this against the background of both fighting amongst the nations and every kind of natural disaster. What is the evangelist up to in all of this? Surely, S Luke's purpose is to point out for us how faith in Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection, is to be maintained even in the midst of every kind of conflict and suffering: and one way in which this will be achieved is through the very presence of Jesus Himself with those who follow him, even in their hour of darkest trial. It is a message of hope. Not the hope which is blithe optimism, but the hope of which the prophet Malachi speaks: the hope which is the

vindication of the righteous and the just. This hope comes from the promises made by the One who has himself undergone crucifixion: whose flesh has been torn not by shrapnel but nails, and pierced not with the bullet but the lance, and who has passed through all this to life eternal.

Our Remembrance is nothing without this Christian hope, this hope in the Word-made-Flesh, this hope that *neither death nor life...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*. It is the gift and virtue of Hope, properly understood, which alone can preserve our commemorations on this day and at this time of year from the danger of mawkishness or mere sentimentality. If our Christian faith cannot and must not disguise or evade the awfulness of war, and the atrocities to which it can give birth, then our Christian hope can look beyond it, to that Kingdom where the Son of Man reigns in glory, whose coming S Luke points to in the Gospel for today, whose birth-pangs can be felt even in this present age, and which, we are promised, will belong to all those whose faith endures to the end. It is this hope which alone can begin to make sense of the mystery of suffering: the suffering of the family of the young soldier blown to smithereens by the land-mine, or the deadly activity of the suicide bomber, or even, tragic irony, by friendly fire. The husband and wife team who clean this very Chapel for us lost a great-nephew in Iraq in just such circumstances a short while ago. The victims of war are not other people: they are among us, they are one with us; they are our neighbour.

Hope alone can make sense of suffering. The Christian faith puts suffering, innocent suffering, the suffering of the pure Victim who is both God and Man, at the heart of its hope for the salvation of the world; indeed, without that suffering, the suffering of Our Lord upon the Cross, there is no Christian hope for salvation at all. The suffering of Christ was, is, always must be, unique, for in His suffering, God Himself suffers in the human nature which he took upon Himself at his Incarnation. Yet we must also say that in all who suffer, in the crippled and maimed, in all those who bear the wounds of war in body, mind and spirit, in the bereaved and those who mourn, the suffering yet glorious Christ is present too, hiding the wounded in the deep shelter of his own wounds.

And the dead? The holy souls in purgatory, among them the countless dead in war, are no less present to Christ. He accompanies them on their final journey, beyond all time and human imagining, into the fullness of the vision and presence of God. And here at the altar of God, where remembrance and suffering and hope all meet in the commemorative sacrifice of Calvary which both anticipates and reveals to the eyes of faith the glory of heaven, we plead Christ's saving death and resurrection for them, as for the living. This is the greatest act of piety and charity we can perform. We are called to

express our undying love for all the holy souls, not least the fallen in war, by means of our unfailing prayers for them. And in so doing, as Holy Church as faithfully taught whenever this doctrine has been questioned, we help not only them, but ourselves also. As St Thomas More wrote in 1529, in the voice of one of those departed souls longing for heaven speaking to the faithful still on earth,

For as he that lighteth another candle hath never the less light himself, and he that bloweth the fire for anoter to warm him doth warm himself also therewith, so surely, good friends, that good that ye send hither before you both greatly refresheth us, and yet is wholly reserved here for you with our prayers added thereto for your further advantage.

Pie Jesu, Domine, dona eis requiem

Lord Jesus, by thy merciful kindness, and by the power of thy holy Cross, grant the faithful departed a speedy entry into the Sabbath rest of heaven.

Amen.