

Sermon

Sunday 8th November, 2009

Lessons Deuteronomy 4 Romans 8: 31 – 35 St John 15: 9 – 17

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O Lord, grant to all who contend for the faith, never to injure it by clamour and impatience; but speaking the truth in love, so to present it that it may be loved, and that men and women may see in it Your goodness and Your beauty. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On behalf of the Armed Forces, Service Chaplains prepared some liturgy for use in worship in parishes. Much of what they wrote, or the poems which they selected, was informed by their histories, the stories passed down from one generation to another within each unit, and their own hard won experiences of active service. Among other things, they prepared a *Call to Remembrance*.

They wrote:

Remember Ypres, Gallipoli, the Somme, Mons and Verdun. Remember the Western Desert, El Alamein, the Normandy beaches. Remember Coventry, Dresden, Hiroshima and the Burma Road. Remember Korea, the Falkland Islands, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, East Timor, Afghanistan and the Gulf.

Remember the courage, the comradeship, the ingenuity, the spirit of working together for a common cause, the planning together for a better world that would come with peace. Remember the call to arms, the patriotic songs, the partings which were such sweet sorrow. The sound of the drum, the skirl of the pipe, the prayer that God would be on our side.

Remember the carnage; the colossal horror of war. Remember the widows of sixty years and more, the old men and women who never knew their fathers. Remember the love that was lost, the wisdom wasted, the minds that are still pained by memories. Remember the families bereft by recent wars and conflict. Remember this day the children who will

die while nation fights nation.

Remember the One who asked us to remember them.
Father, remember us; and forgive us our sins against you and
our fellow man.

Throughout my ministry, I have on Remembrance Sunday tended to reflect mostly upon the two World Wars and, for obvious reasons, I believe that that is justified. The sheer scale of the loss endured, on all sides, during the two world wars towers above the losses which we and others have suffered since. But, the pain of loss, the personal suffering which accompanies every war and conflict, is no less: a son, husband or father killed in action is devastating whatever the scale of the military action. The Service Chaplains cited the names of battles, all of which are well-known, from the First and Second World Wars but they also mention the Falkland Islands, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, East Timor, Afghanistan and the Gulf.

One of the most powerful images that I have of the Falklands Conflict is that of the British landing ships which were attacked by the Argentinian Air Force in Bluff Cove. The Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, said:

The landing ships, *Sir Tristram* and *Sir Galahad*, full of men, equipment and munitions, had been sent round to Bluff Cove and Fitzroy in preparation for the final assault on Port Stanley. The clouds cleared while the ships were unloading the Rapier missiles which would protect them from an air attack and the Argentinians scored on both. *Sir Galahad* had not discharged its troops and the result was great loss of life and many survivors were left with terrible burns. The Welsh Guards

took the brunt of it. As on all these occasions, the natural reaction was ‘if only’ – above all, if only the men had been taken off and dispersed as soon as they arrived then nothing like this number of casualties would have been suffered. But the losses would have been even greater were it not for the heroism of the helicopter pilots. They hovered close to the burning oil slicks around the ship and used their draughts from the rotors to blow life rafts full of survivors away from the inferno into which they were being drawn.

There were 255 British deaths in the Falklands Conflict. It is right that we remember the sacrifices made by those who serve in the Armed Forces and their families, sacrifices the cost of which can be very high: in physical or mental health, in relationships and, sometimes, the ultimate or supreme sacrifice of life.

I was struck by the story of Kitty Eckersley, a personal story but one which has been repeated many times. War is about what happens at the very highest level of governments and it is also about what happens to your family or the families in your street or neighbourhood. Kitty’s story is from the First World War:

When I found out that I was pregnant I went to see them at the leather works and they said they would find me some light work. So I had a very nice job and worked there until I was seven months pregnant. I didn’t go out much because I had a very bad time during my pregnancy – the only thing I could keep in my stomach was carrots. They were cheap, so I had two pounds of carrots every day. I was very thin at the time.

My mother had a little job picking strawberries at a jam factory, so there was only me in the house when I heard the postman come. I knew there would be a letter for me, so I ran down in my nightdress and opened the door, snatched the letter off him and ran in and shut the door again. I opened the letter and saw it was from his sergeant. It just said, ‘I’m sorry to tell you of the death of your husband.’ Well, that was as far as I could read. I don’t really know what happened

over the next few minutes, but I must have run out of my house as I was, in my bare feet, and banged on the next door. They brought some blankets and wrapped me up in them and sent for my mother, so she came home and treated me for shock. His letter was only from his sergeant, so I thought perhaps it was an error. So later I wrote back to the sergeant, but I had another letter to say that he also had been killed. Then, later on, I got the official news.

There is no doubt that war and conflict can witness acts of the greatest heroism, the likes of which we do not ordinarily encounter in everyday life. War and conflict can witness tragedies: the loss of a son, husband and father. And, violence can take decent human beings into places they never dreamed of seeing, let alone participating in. In his book, *Armageddon*, in the chapter entitled, 'The Bitter End,' Max Hastings recalls last days of the Second World War. He said that many allied soldiers found it confusing and, afterwards, haunting, that they were fighting children. Hastings tells the story of a British Bren-gunner firing into a house defended by Hitler Jugend (Hitler Youth). The gunner trained his weapon on a side door from which, he said, it was plain that, sooner or later, the cornered defenders would try to escape. Hastings writes:

A few minutes later, a figure dashed out. After a burst of Bren fire, the German fell writhing and screaming in the midst of the street. As the British soldier pressed the trigger again, he glimpsed the face of a young boy, who slumped in death. 'His features have been printed on my mind ever since,' said the infantryman. 'I have always asked myself: if I hadn't fired the second burst, might that boy have lived to grow into a decent man?'

Of those bitter, last days, Private Walter Brown of the US 90th Division, said that he was sickened to find that he and his platoon had shot ten of a group of

fifteen German boys firing on them from a mountainside near the Czech border:

‘we felt like butchers, and yet those bullets would have killed us as dead as those of any SS soldier.’ War and violent conflict takes humanity to places which, in its morally higher moments, would never even imagine was possible.

We cannot meet on this day in 2009 and not bring to mind those currently serving in Afghanistan. It seems to me that they need our support and that of the government which sent them there. There have been 230 British deaths.

This morning, as a mark of respect, I want to read the names of 23 of them:

Nicholas Webster-Smith (24), Royal Military Police
Alan Squire (39), RAF 120 Squadron
Aaron McClure (19), Royal Anglian Regiment 1st Battalion
James Thompson (27), Army
Robert Pearson (22), Queens Royal Lancers
Darren George (23), Royal Anglian
Paul Bartlett (35), Royal Marines
Damien Jackson (19), Parachute Regiment
Michael Jones (26), Royal Marines
Richard Larkin (39), SAS
Barry Dempsey (29), Royal Highland Fusilers,
Royal Regiment of Scotland
Georgie Sparks (19), Royal Marines 42 Commando
Dean John (25), Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
Daniel Shepherd (28), Ordnance Disposal Group
Matthew Hatton (23), 40 Regiment Royal Artillery
Nathan Cuthbertson (19), Parachute Regiment, 2nd Battalion
Robert Laws (18), 2nd Battalion, Mercian Regiment
Kevin Elliot (24), Black Watch, 3rd Battalion, the
Royal Regiment of Scotland
James Hill (23), 1st Battalion, The Coldstream Guards
Jamie Jones (20), Grenadier Guards
Mark Evison (26), 1st Battalion Welsh Guards
Johnathon Young (18), 3rd Battalion, The Yorkshire Regiment

remember and honour those who have given their lives that we might enjoy our freedoms. Amen.