

Sermon

Sunday 11th November, 2007
Remembrance Sunday

Lessons Micah 4: 1 – 8 2 Thessalonians 2: 13 – 3: 5 St Luke 1: 68 - 79

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Compose the turmoil of our thoughts, O Spirit Divine; and tranquillise our unquiet hearts: so shall we be still and know that You are God. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In May 1945, on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, the Prime Minister, Winston

Churchill, spoke to the nation:

My dear friends, this is your hour. This is not victory of a party or of any class. It's a victory of the great British nation as a whole. We were the first, in this ancient land, to draw the sword against tyranny. After a while we were left all alone against the most treacherous military power that has been seen. We were all alone for a whole year.

There we stood, alone. Did anyone want to give in? [The crowd shouted, 'No!'] Were we downhearted? [Again, 'No!' was the shout] The lights went out and the bombs came down. But every man, woman and child in the country had no thought of quitting the struggle. London can take it. So we came back after long months from the jaws of death, out of the mouth of hell, while all the world wondered. When shall the reputation and faith of this generation of...men and women fail? I say that in the long years to come not only will the people of this island but of the world, wherever the bird of freedom chirps in human hearts, look back to what we've done and they will say, 'Do not despair, do not yield to violence and tyranny, march straight forward and die if need be – unconquered.' Now we have emerged from one deadly struggle – a terrible foe has been cast on the ground and awaits our judgment and mercy.

The Prime Minister was not exaggerating when he spoke of the 'jaws of death' and the 'mouth of hell.' The freedom of our nation was secured at a terrible cost. We have enjoyed freedom and democracy for over sixty years because of the sacrifices made by others in their time. How different history would have been had Hitler won! Everything that has been possible in our life has only been possible because of those

who fought to keep these islands free. Our debt to those who fought, died and suffered in the Second World War could not be greater. Our debt and that of our parents extends further back to the First World War. The heroism, discipline, determination, courage, endurance and sacrifice of those who lived and fought cannot go unmarked.

Sergeant Thomas Painting, 1st Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps, tells his story of the battle of Aisne in the First World War. Painting said:

At the battle of Aisne we got over the river and onto the high ground over a mile in front of the Aisne. We knew there was about a brigade of Jerries against us and we were only seven platoons. During the fight we got pushed back about 300 yards; we had to leave our wounded and dead. The Highland Light Infantry and Worcesters came up. Private Wilson of the HLI and one of our men attacked a machine-gun. Our man got killed but Private Wilson killed the machine-gunner and captured the position and got the Victoria Cross. Our man got a wooden cross. That's the difference, you see. One killed – one a Victoria Cross.

Heroism and death happened every day. Some heroism was recognised and rewarded but much of it was not. In the course of a passing moment, two men were dead, the machine-gunner and the man from the King's Royal Rifle Corp, and one was a decorated hero. Children are left without fathers, wives without husbands and mothers and fathers without their sons. Somehow the tiny word 'war' does not always immediately bring to mind that fighting will in the end mean loss, heartache and lasting wounds.

War is ugly. It dehumanises us. Sergeant Major Masayo Enomoto was a Japanese soldier during the Second World War. The defining experience of his life happened in May 1945. Enomoto and his unit were behind enemy lines in northern China. He and his comrades were hungry and tired. They had been away from their base for

many months. In a nearby deserted village, Enomoto discovered a Chinese woman. She spoke Japanese. She told him that her parents had tried to persuade her to leave, but she had decided to stay. The Japanese people are not bad people she told him. It was a mortal mistake. Enomoto raped her and then stabbed her to death with his sword. He cut chunks of her flesh to feed to his men.

After the war, Enomoto was imprisoned by the Chinese. He and the other Japanese prisoners had expected draconian measures from their gaolers, but instead they received food each day and decent treatment. Enomoto said that he started to feel remorse because of the generous attitude of the Chinese. At his own instigation, he confessed his crimes to them. In 1956, after the Chinese had investigated and verified his crimes, they allowed Enomoto to return, as a free man, to Japan.

Professor Yuki Tanaka in his book, *Japanese War Crimes in World War Two*, states that 'the practice of cannibalism [amongst the Japanese Imperial Army] was much more widely practised than previously thought.' In releasing Enomoto, the Chinese sought to embarrass Japan and its Emperor with the crimes its soldiers had committed in their name.

Zinaida Pytkina worked for SMERSH during the Second World War. SMERSH was a Russian organisation set up to find and kill spies. In 1943, she was twenty-two. The Red Army would form raiding parties and snatch a German from the front line in order to take him back for interrogation by SMERSH. These captured soldiers were not considered to be prisoners of war and so could be treated as SMERSH saw fit. Speaking fifty-five years after the events, Zinaida Pytkina said, 'We treated them the same way they treated us.' On being told to shoot a young German soldier, she said:

What did I feel? I would have cut him up if I had been asked...I hated seeing him. Not only me, all of us hated looking at them because so many Soviet people lost their lives – young people.

When she raised the pistol to shoot the soldier, she said:

I felt joy. My hand didn't tremble when I killed him. The Germans didn't ask us to spare them. They knew they were guilty, and I was angry. I was seeing an enemy, and my father and uncles, mother and brothers died because of them.'

In war, compromises are made, resources are limited and decisions are taken by individuals which have far-reaching effects. In 1991, a film, *A British Betrayal*, was shown on BBC2. There were many complaints but none of them were upheld. The film tells the story of the repatriation of Cossacks to the Red Army. In 1945, in southern Austria, the British V Corps, held the province of Carinthia. There were hundreds of thousands of refugees in the area. Amongst the refugees were many enemy troops, Cossacks, who had fought against Stalin and the Allies but now wanted to surrender to the British. Harold Macmillan, then senior British political advisor for the area, wrote in his diary that to hand over the Cossacks to Stalin's men 'is condemning them to slavery, torture and probably death.' Three weeks after VE Day, the British government agreed to repatriate all of the refugees, including all Cossacks, whether they were Soviet citizens or not.

Maria Platonow's uncle was one of the non-Soviet Cossacks sent back. Like the other Cossack officers, he was assured safety by the British. With 1500 others, he left the camp to attend what he had been told was a conference to discuss what was to happen. They were never to return to their families. They were repatriated. Back in the camp, as news broke of the deception, horrific scenes followed as people began to panic. Years later, Maria said that the focus of her anger, and that of other

survivors, was not simply the injustice of repatriation of everyone, but also the manner in which it was carried out. The men never said a proper goodbye to their loved ones. Maria has said, ‘The anguish of that one denied farewell, of the words unsaid, of the embrace that never occurred, torments their relatives to this day.’ We have much to be grateful for to those who fought, suffered and died: they gave us our freedom, but freedom comes at a price. In war, resources are limited, human beings on all sides are fallible and compromises are made.

Writing over two thousand years ago, the prophet, Micah, wrote of a time when God will bring peace. The prophet wrote:

He will settle disputes among the nations, among the great powers near and far. They will hammer their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning-knives. Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for battle again. Everyone will live in peace.

Can you hear the heaviness of heart of the prophet? These words do not come lightly. The author knows what it means to be at war. He knows it means death, suffering and ugliness. He knows that peace will only come when all nations are at peace. He knows that peace means that people can flourish, children grow up in safety, young men are not lost in their prime and old people can live in contentment. These are universal feelings and desires. The God of the Bible is a God of peace. As Christians, we are He called to commit ourselves to pray and work for peace.

I want to close with a story from more recent times. Simon Armitage is a war poet writing about more recent conflicts. One of his poems, entitled *The Manhunt*, tells the story of Laura and Eddie. Eddie was a soldier working in Bosnia for the UN. He wore the ‘blue lid,’ the distinctive blue helmet. He said he expected to shoot and be

shot at. What he found unbearable was the killing of innocent people. On one occasion, doing his job, he lifted a barrier at a checkpoint and waved through death squads. A couple of days later, he witnessed the massacre. A heavily pregnant woman hung from a tree, cut to pieces. Sometime later, Eddie tried to hang himself but the branch would not take his weight. He was in Bosnia in our name. His wife Laura inspired Armitage's poem. During his tour of duty, Eddie was shot in the face. It traces the scar of a bullet that took part of her husband's face away, then continued through his body and it describes the painful process of trying to reach him, touch him, love him and make him human again.

The Manhunt

After the first phase,
after passionate nights and intimate days,
only then would he let me trace
the frozen river which ran through his face,
only then would he let me explore
the blown hinge of his lower jaw,
the damaged, porcelain collar-bone,
and mind and attend
the fractured rudder of his shoulder-blade,
and finger and thumb
the parachute silk of his punctured lung.
Only then could I bind the struts
and climb the rungs of his broken ribs,
and feel the hurt
of his grazed heart.
Skirting along,
only then could I picture the scan,
the foetus of metal beneath his chest
where the bullet had finally come to rest.
Then I widened the search,
traced the scarring back to its source
to a sweating, unexploded mine
buried deep in his mind,
around which
every nerve in his body had
tightened and closed.
Then, and only then, did I
come close.

The cost of war to our armed services and their families is large and often unseen.

Amen.