

Sermon for Remembrance Sunday - 8th November 2009

'They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old.' Whenever I hear Laurence Binyon's words recited at Remembrance observances, it strikes me that he would have made a great career in public relations. He manages, in those four lines we have just heard, to put a quite remarkably positive spin on being a fatal war casualty. You are not forgotten, and you avoid the ageing process, which preoccupies so many of us who live into our fifties and beyond.

Frankly, I still think that the soldiers for whom Binyon wrote would have greatly preferred not to die at all. They would have preferred not to risk illness and injury, not to be terrified by gas or shells or burning fuel, not to be shouted at by NCOs, bereaved of their friends, or in many cases taken from their homes and peacetime occupations at all. They would have preferred there to be no war - even if that did mean their getting a bit stiffer with advancing age and enjoying a decent obscurity after death. Some of the twentieth century Fallen we commemorate were career soldiers, some joined up enthusiastically in a moment of national crisis, but many - let's face it - were conscripts who might well not have opted to fight for King and Country at all if King and Parliament hadn't determined that they must.

Yet we remember them anyhow. We remember them because of how they coped with the situation in which they found themselves, how they did what they could (often with great skill and ingenuity) to discharge a thoroughly unwished-for task, how they tapped resources within themselves to go on further than they had probably believed possible. We remember them for their humanity and their loyalty to their comrades, for the way they looked after each other, took risks together that they might not have taken alone. We remember them for the love they had for people left at home, and for the grief that their loss caused - and may still cause today - to the bereaved.

We remember the Fallen regardless of individual bravery or achievement - many who went 'over the top' from First World War trenches, were machine-gunned in sight of the Normandy beaches or were torpedoed in the Falklands Task Force had little chance to shine in either respect. We remember them, too, regardless of whether or not we would ourselves have launched the campaigns in which they fell; in fact the distinction between soldier, sailor and airman on the one hand, and politician on the other, is never more crucial than at times like this, because it enables us to honour those who risk everything while still forming a sober judgment on the decisions which made it necessary.

In many cases, though, we also remember collective achievements to which the fallen, the wounded and the unscathed, statesmen and administrators, civilians as well as soldiers, all contributed: the preservation of international order and national independence; the ending of terrifying threats to civilian populations and of terrible inhumanity to the victims of despotic régimes.

All these are reasons for giving thanks to God. We thank him for examples that can profit each of us in situations far removed from the battlefield - the example of an unwelcome task done well by some quite ordinary people; the example of human friendships born under unlikely conditions, which led to empathy and caring and a motive for sacrifice far stronger than what could flow from political ideals or legal

obligation. We thank him for his action for good in human history, a key message of the Hebrew Scriptures even though it is sometimes hard to see how specific moments of history bear this out. We thank him for the pride that some can feel in heroes, and the peace of mind that comes to others from having paid a worthy tribute.

'God is our hope and strength' says the Psalmist, 'a very present help in trouble'. The common experience of Forces Chaplains is that a need to know a strength and a love outside oneself, to look beyond the human and the temporary to values that are eternal, comes to the surface in times of imminent crisis as never before. That too is a lesson war teaches us, but which is not confined to war. The personal God, the Father who loves us, cares particularly for those who need his presence most and often lets that presence be perceived, however dimly, in moments of deepest anxiety. He does not need people to be deep theologians to know him: we here in this church, who make a point of 'meeting people where they are', should more than anyone respect the uneducated, muddled, frantic but totally sincere faith of the soldier at risk of his life.

Psalm 46 may have seemed an odd choice for today's first reading. It sets some pretty high ideals - 'we will not fear though the hills be carried into the midst of the sea', 'God makes wars to cease in all the earth'. This is not the voice of experience speaking; certainly wars were far from ceasing in the days of the ancient Hebrew kingdoms, and I'm prepared to bet that the Psalmist would have been pretty nervous had he actually encountered a coastal earthquake. It is, however, the voice of hope, and the voice of one who understood the confidence that should come from a knowledge of God, even if human frailty was bound to shake that confidence at the final testing moment. Even though our free will, our potential to love God and do right voluntarily, comes only at the price of an ability to go wrong and therefore at the risk of conflicts and hatred, yet we can say that God does not wish for war. The lesser of two evils it may sometimes be, yet an evil it remains; and one day that evil will pass forever into history, far removed as that day may seem just now. And while bad things continue to happen, God suffers with us as Jesus demonstrated supremely on the cross; with our Maker and Friend alongside us, there is indeed a sense in which no calamity should make us fear.

The other reading today came from Revelation. Again, not an obvious link to Remembrance. The vision ascribed to John was recounted to encourage the early generations of downtrodden Christians, who are generally known to have been pacifists; it wasn't addressed to warriors at all. The 'great tribulation' through which the white-robed palm-bearers had come was a persecution endured passively, turning the other cheek. But God's Word is discerned *through* Scripture as much as in its actual language: what first-century Mediterranean believers may have needed to hear is not necessarily the only lesson to be found in the text. That sacrifice is rewarded and that present suffering may not be the last word are thoughts that can encourage all of us, veteran, bereaved and other non-combatant alike.

When the Armistice Day silence was first observed, it took place within nations - not just our own - reeling from the loss of high proportions of their young adult male populations. Few would not have been touched by the destruction of war, few would not have been seeking to make some sort of sense of the events which had cut short promising lives and shaken old certainties. The Great War didn't inexorably lead

people into faith: for some it was the last straw that confirmed a steady undermining of old certainties. For others it changes the way their faith was understood. It shook the complacencies of liberal Christianity and reminded Europe that evil was still a force, that discipleship could come with a price. Many protestants who had previously maintained a rigid resistance to praying for the dead, found that a reaction to a loved one's death no less instinctive than tending another loved one's injuries. Today, despite a continuing casualty toll in Afghan and other war zones, it is faith in politicians that seems more likely to suffer than faith in God, and for many controversy over the rights and wrongs of conflicts seems to overshadow any interest in what happens on the front line.

Yet Remembrance Sunday reminds us that each single person does matter before God and – very deeply – to some of his or her fellows amongst us; that goodness is there to be found in the experience of ordinary human beings; that an individual's faith, however rough-hewn, is a precious gift to be respected and nurtured; and that the message of Christ is one of future hope, even at moments of total chaos and disaster.