

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Matthew 5.4

Every year, it's the same. I always rather dread preaching on Remembrance Sunday. It's so important to get it right. Juggling those elements of the patriotic, and of treasured family histories, with an honouring, too, of the men and women of our present standing military services; and especially those who have faced the fears and ghastly, unforgettable brutalities of War: Again, the suffering, and the deaths of young men and women before their time, *and* those acts of selfless heroism and goodness shining through, despite all.

And, as this *is* a Christian commemoration, still to preach the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ *within* all these proper concerns.

And to keep it short!

Simply, of course, the key theme is in the name: '*Remembrance*' Sunday. And, in our village churches, the task of remembrance could be confined to remembering before God, and giving thanks for the individual human lives of those from our villages who in the past sacrificed their lives for the freedom of our country.

But can this special 'remembering' today - whether here locally, or nationally - ever be that simple? I don't think so, because we can't properly 'remember' today without also bringing to mind, and addressing war itself.

And so, each Remembrance Sunday is never the same. It's different, each and every year, because what we learn from our present context, always shapes and recasts *how* we remember the past; and how we try again to answer the perennial questions of -

Why do we *still* have to have wars? What justifies going to war? Aren't there supposed to be rules of war that protect civilians ... and in the theatre of battle, protect our humanity?

And where as a Christian should I make my stand, proclaiming the Gospel of peace and reconciliation?

This year there are at least *two* big differences for me: one personal, and one surely affecting us all and shaping our Remembrance this Sunday.

Recently, the nephew of a close friend of mine, in Ireland, was killed while volunteering in the Ukrainian army. Like his father and brother, Robert had served with distinction in the Irish army. Robert was a highly trained and capable soldier. But upon leaving the Army, like many, he couldn't settle, nor hold down a job as a civilian. So he enlisted in a special unit in Ukraine. And he sort of loved it. He liked being in a real war, with a real cause, giving purpose and meaning to his life. The first time he was severely injured, the vehicle he was driving had triggered a landmine. His face took the brunt of the damage. The family brought him home to Ireland, and found money for his surgery and rehabilitation. But one eye could *not* be saved; and his sight in the other was impaired. Still, that was somewhat of a relief for the family; though what was Robert going to do now with the rest of his life?

Well, as soon as he was fit enough, he went back to Ukraine and took an office job in the army, in logistics.

And then, the next they knew, he had volunteered to lead a special unit conducting sorties into Russian-held territory. The unit was surrounded by Russians. And in covering the last chance of retreat for his men, this time Robert was thoroughly blown up by a shell. His remains have now been retrieved and he'll be cremated in Ukraine.

About six weeks ago, I was invited to a gathering of 'family solidarity'. I can't say I looked forward to it.

Yet, although I was sure there was a very real underlay of grief, none of that was on show. Rather the sentiment expressed was that no one was surprised that that would be the way, inevitably, it had ended for Robert. Robert was probably at his best functioning as a 'warrior', effective at killing; knit-close in camaraderie with his men; brave, maybe reckless, but his men trusted and followed him. Certainly the Ukrainians fighting for their freedom regard him as a hero.

So, today - with some qualifications - I find myself reflecting on how Robert's story could well be translated, with pride, into the same First or Second World War settings that we remember most this morning: a witness to courage, and self-sacrifice in the face of an evil, aggressive enemy. However, I think Robert's family might tell a more complex story. One, perhaps, of mixed motivations. And, perhaps too, of what any of us would be capable of in practice, or simply in our

minds, when there's a war on; when voices and forces bigger than us, and compelling, teach us, *rightly* or wrongly, who our enemy is: to fear and to hate, and then to give us licence to destroy and to eliminate them. And, inevitably, under the right conditions we do so, because it's as if that capacity is in our DNA ... the DNA of all of us.

The second big difference this year - mired still in the fate of Ukraine, and the ignorance of the Russian people; and in equal measure horrified and *almost* resigned to the current carnage in the Middle East - are the new spectres of more lethal and sinister weapons, remotely deployed, along with tactics indifferent to civilians lives; and the raw immediacy of it all viewed evermore intimately on our screens. How the '*fighting*' itself, which in some way should be kept 'clean' by the rules of battle, is manifestly becoming muddied and 'dirty', and outside civilised conventions.

So, thinking back to our wars, the ones we remember today, were they really as clean and decent ... on our side at least? Don't all those in-depth history programmes tell a different story? Doesn't war, in the end, corrupt us all, and *civilians, like us*, will increasingly become the main victims? There is, after all, much talk of the shifting, a reordering, of geopolitical realities. The freedoms of liberal democracy for which we fought - and won - two wars, threatened now again by autocratic regimes. And perhaps this time round to be swept away?

So where should Christians take their stand within the inevitable violence, gross suffering and uncertain freedoms of present and future wars? Like everyone else, simply stand over the piles and piles and piles of shattered bodies? Look away, fence it off 'somewhere else' ... and optimistically, hope for the best.

Or, put it all into God's hands, trusting that He will make it all good in the end, and of course in the meantime keep *us* safe?

Yes, those are options. But I don't think they're *quite* good enough.

As Christians we do have something *crucial* to say about Christ's ongoing and enduring love for us and for all creation. And his concern, and grief for each individual life: not merely from a distance in heaven, but within and among us all, *even* knowing the violence and squalid-ness of humanity. And still he loves us, and still he suffers with us, and with every individual who suffers and dies. And

these aren't piles of bodies, but individual persons and lives, each loved by God who suffers on the Cross to save us all.

We are not at war now. But as Christians we must respond with generosity, and with the willingness to stand as witnesses alongside the suffering of Christ ... and, if we can, like Jesus, to *not* respond with violence against His enemies.

So, on this and all Remembrance Sundays, as Christians, we are called to be as clear-eyed about the past, as about our capacities in the present, and into the future. And, to take *our* stand over the dead, *repentant*, with a true hope sprung from the Cross of Christ, and trusting in the Gospel of Salvation, when God will wipe away all our tears.

But, perhaps, as someone once said, "God cannot wipe away our tears, until we fully learn to weep".

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