

SERMON FOR REMEMBRANCE DAY 2017 | 12.11.17

They do it so well. The annual act of Remembrance in the Royal Albert Hall last night was a great pageant of all that is best about the British military tradition. Everything was immaculate, from the shine on the boots to the precision of the marching bands. We heard from a 90 year old Wren deployed in code breaking in the 2nd world war, from two women currently in senior command roles; we watched the Chelsea pensioners stride out and heard the familiar bugle calls. On huge screens we saw the carnage at Passchendaele and heard the story of someone who had served at El Alamein. The more recently bereaved were recalled and during the two minutes silence, thousands of bright red poppies floated down and settled on the tops of the bear skins and white peaked caps gathered below.

And they sang *Eternal Father strong to save* and heard the familiar words: *They shall not grow old as we grow old; age shall not weary them nor the years condemn...*

It was hugely moving – and yet.

As our annual commemoration, last night's event looked back to a century of armed conflict - of pitched battles and huge scale campaigns. It reflected on the amazing gallantry of divisions and companies of men, working and fighting together. One of the most touching video clips was of a man who recalled moving forward in battle – only to hear three of his best mates being mown down directly behind him. With tears in his eyes he said he remembers them every day.

Yet war isn't just about massed ranks and comforting solidarity. War is also the lonely place where men and women – and children too – often suffer on their own. This year, of course, marks the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Not 'our war' perhaps, but without doubt it remains one of the bloodiest and most systematic attacks on Christianity the world has ever seen. It has been calculated that 300,000 clergy alone were killed in the Soviet era - almost a hundred times the numbers slaughtered in the Roman persecutions of the Early Church which we also rightly celebrate.

And most of those Russian martyrs died, not in open battle but in ones and twos – shot, drowned or buried alive. Metropolitan Veniamin of St Petersburg for example, a monk of advancing age, was tied to a post and turned into a pillar of ice after cold water was thrown over him. Irena Ratushinskaya, who wrote so movingly about the Russian gulags, reflected that during the Stalinist era the Russian word for mercy – *miloserdiye* – simply disappeared from the language.

What the Soviet authorities were trying to do, what the Nazis were attempting and what we see similarly in ISIS and in many of the contemporary revolutionary movements with Islamic backgrounds, is the attempt to ‘reshape humanity’ to fit a particular ideology. Intolerant of any dissent, society is turned into a utilitarian ‘one size fits all’: *you think like us or you have no place here*. With all the power at their disposal they enforce a collectivization that labours for what it believes to be justice – but at the expense of truth. It purports to restore hope but does not understand the need for individuals to create their own space for human flourishing. As Boris Pasternak remarked, *you must live; you cannot always be making preparations to live*.

What finally overcame the Soviet regime was not another theoretical philosophy like Communism itself, but the desire of the Russian people for freedom of thought – what the poet Elena Shvarts calls a ‘holy madness’. *Religion, she says, provides us with pearls of unreasonable thought*’ so that words like mercy, repentance and conscience are able to return to ordinary people’s vocabularies once more.

As the bollards are erected on Westminster Bridge, on the boulevards in Nice and, most recently, in front of academic institutions like University College in Paget Street, we see how war is changing shape but not its nature. It may not be pitched battles – although there are still some being fought in Syria and Iraq even now. It is more likely to be terrorist outrages that will engulf totally innocent pedestrians going about their ordinary business.

Of course, as Christians we will continue to pray for our leaders as Paul encourages us to do in our second reading.

We will also do our utmost to put pressure on those leaders to work for justice and peace – not least in our prayer campaign for Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, caught up in an attempt by the Iranians to exercise leverage through her totally unjustified imprisonment.

But war is about trying to change minds. So our focus will also continue to be educational, doing all we can to stop the radicalisation of the young in this country. However wishy-washy our liberal values may appear to be, Elena Shvarts is right: we need to have the freedom to share ideas, ‘the pearls of unreasonableness’, because it is that freedom that enables us to be fully fledged, rounded people. We have to defend the right of each other to talk total nonsense if we so wish.

And that was perhaps the most moving part of last night: in the Albert Hall we watched eight young interns, in their bright yellow sweatshirts, who were serving with the British and Commonwealth War Graves Commission around the world.

In front of the Queen and the thousands watching, they affirmed their commitment to take on the legacy of those who had died in war, to hold up the values for which so many had given their all.

Yet for the most part they acknowledged that we will have to do that, one by one. It is a sad fact of life that much of the solidarity we saw last night is much less evident today. People don’t ‘join up’ in the way they once did.

But doing what we can, where we are, remains the challenge – exerting moral pressure on those who think that violence is an option; by showing that mercy has not been excluded from our vocabulary after all. For us as Christians, pointing to Christ as the one who shows the good that flows from our willingness to sacrifice ourselves for others.

Last night was a powerful reminder of the past: but we may have to find new ways of celebrating the memories of many unseen heroes, in the years to come.