

SERMON FOR REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY | 11.11.2018

At last it was all over. Snipers had taken away the last British life, George Ellison, and the last American, Henry Gunther who was the very last soldier to die on the western front, killed at 10:59, one minute before the Armistice was to take effect at 11am. They were the last of nearly 20 million killed worldwide – let alone the scores of those injured and those bereaved.

And every November 11th we recall the dead – trawling through grainy photographs and ancient newsreels, hearing the more famous lines of poetry from Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, Laurence Binyon, Isaac Rosenberg and this by John McRae:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
between the crosses, row on row,
that mark our place;
and in the sky
the larks, still bravely singing, fly
scarce heard amid the guns below....

We hear stories of immense heroism ... with the deepest possible regret that such tragedies could ever have been necessary.

But our Remembrance this year, of all years, needs to have another flavour too. In the middle of all the sadness, radio and TV programmes on the First World War have also brought to light the private correspondence of the bereaved, the letters written after family members had received the news that their son, husband or brother had been killed. And in ways which I think we would find almost inconceivable now, the women (and most were written by women) talk about their pride in the sacrifice made by those they loved: *he died for his country; he died for such a noble cause; he died to save his men.*

St Paul, writing to the Romans which we hear towards the end of our second reading, wrote: *Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.*

Yet that was the experience in so many theatres of war. Take for example Lance Corporal Jock Christie of the Islington based Finsbury Rifles, fighting not on the western front but in the sands of the Gaza Peninsular against the Ottoman Turks in 1917. Already wounded at Gallipoli, Christie's citation for his Victoria Cross read as follows:

‘...the enemy immediately made counter-attacks up the communication trenches. Lance-Corporal Christie, seeing what was happening, took a supply of bombs and went alone about 50 yards in the open along the communication trench and bombed the enemy. He continued to do this in spite of heavy opposition until a block had been established. On his way back he bombed more of the enemy who were moving up the trench. His prompt action cleared a difficult position at a most difficult time and saved many lives... he showed the greatest coolness and a total disregard for his own safety...’

But why would he do that? At such great danger to himself? He showed great coolness and saved many lives...

Of course St Paul’s letter is speaking about Jesus and about a very different context: back in 1st century not 20th century Palestine: while we were still weak and at the right time - Christ died for the ungodly. In this God proves his love for us in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

But isn’t that precisely what we are celebrating today? That the example of Jesus was taken up by the likes of an ordinary Islington postal-worker-come-soldier who, without regard for the people who would benefit from his action, was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice in the trenches near Jaffa?

Of all the themes that will emerge in this great day of celebration I hope that this one great challenge will not be lost in the bunting and the joy: that what Lance Corporal Christie showed was the kind of altruism that any society needs if it is to flourish. It is, in the words of St Ignatius, the *giving without counting the cost, the labouring without any reward save that of knowing that we do God’s will.*

What Christie saw in Jesus was the call to lay down one’s life for others – whether they seem to deserve it or not.

Our lives are not, thank God, as needle-edged as Christie’s, fighting a hundred years ago. But it doesn’t take much to see the parallels in routine, daily terms: taking risks, giving, helping, supporting, working - without any expectation of thanks or of being rewarded.

Today we know that is pretty counter-cultural: so often *nothing is for nothing.* Yet that is what Christianity is all about and why Jesus’ radical Gospel warning sounds so offensive to our ears.

What does Jesus mean when he says: *Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.*

Is that really Jesus' legacy? Strife? Or can we not see that he is reminding us that when we are full of pride, laziness, contempt for others and blatant self-interest, relationships are bound to fail? If some act like Lance-Corporal Christie while others stubbornly refuse to meet half way, conflict is inevitable.

The alternative, St Paul says, has proven itself over and over again: *it is suffering that produces endurance, endurance that produces character and character that produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

On this great national – and indeed international – anniversary, may the generous altruism of so many men and women in the First War encourage us to do what the John Bell's Gradual hymn at 10am expresses so well:

God, give us peace, and more than this,
show us the path where justice is;
and let us never be remiss
working for peace that lasts...

Whatever the cost.

And even, sometimes, with our nearest and dearest.