

SERMON FOR REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY | 10.11.2019

In our mind's eye, whenever we think of war, we tend to imagine big pitched battles. From the forces ranged against Napoleon or the Boers of South Africa, to the men stuck in the trenches of the Somme or the infantry brigades attempting to liberate North Africa or Normandy, we think of the geometry, the stamina and the courage involved as troops were deployed in life and death struggles to win ever more territory from enemy forces.

All over the world at this time of the year, bugles will sound out over immaculate cemeteries the familiar notes of the Last Post, as we will here, commemorating the ultimate sacrifice of all too many.

But there was another kind of war in our recent history: the kind of war that affects civilians even more than soldiers – and lasts for very many more years. We call it the Cold War and this week-end our attention has turned to Berlin and to the breaking down of the wall that divided Europe for nearly thirty years – a war in which countless scores of people lost their lives. I say countless intentionally; the awful thing about the Cold War was that it was not covered by the Vienna convention for armed combatants. We have no idea how many people just disappeared behind the Iron Curtain or the circumstances of the deaths.

In fact we know very little in the west about what was endured by so many in eastern Europe – in East Germany and Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. We can get a taste of it from fiction of course, from the books of John le Carre, Len Deighton and Tom Clancy. Spy thrillers set on either side of the Iron Curtain, Moscow and New York are a familiar genre which have transferred successfully onto television. Many of us can recall pictures of the Soviet tanks rumbling into Warsaw in 1956 and the end of Alexander Dubcek's brave attempt for independence in August 1968. And for a modern example we don't need to go any further than Salisbury and to the attempted murder of Sergei and Yulia Skripal using a lethal nerve agent only found in Russian labs.

But even these do little to help us feel what it must have been like to live behind the Iron Curtain.

Preparing for this I spent time watching video footage of the extent to which the Stasi secret police in East Germany were involved in ordinary people's lives. Was it true that 1:6 citizens had been recruited to spy on families, friends and neighbours – making the Gestapo seem almost benign? Of course families divided by the wall made attempts to escape from the East and scores lost their lives. But the vast majority simply had to suffer the deprivations and the coercion out of fear of the consequences. They knew what happened when people stepped out of line.

And so it was throughout eastern Europe for 20 years: Hoxha in Albania ridding the country of any religion at all; Ceausescu in Romania abandoning children to starve in orphanages and the great spy scandals of Blunt and McClean here in the UK which rocked MI6.

And then a change. On Oct. 12, 1978, Karol Wojtyla, archbishop of Krakow, was elected pope. And one of his first actions was to return to his homeland afterwards and to say: do not be afraid.

In themselves these words seem perfectly normal for a Church leader but in the context of the Cold War they became revolutionary. He said: *(The) curtailment of the religious freedom of individuals and communities is not only a painful experience but is, above all, an attack on man's very dignity. ... It is impossible to accept a position that gives atheists the right of citizenship in public and social life while believers are entirely deprived of the rights of citizenship."*

Standing in Auschwitz outside Krakow he went on We want God, we want God; we want God in the family, we want God in the schools, we want God in books. And such was the impact of that speech that the fragile Solidarity movement took on a new confidence and by 1980, the government had officially recognized it, the first independent trade union in the communist bloc. At the time, President Reagan commented to a friend, *I have a feeling, particularly after the Pope's visit to Poland, that religion may turn out to be the Soviets' Achilles' heel.*

And he may have been right: there is certainly substantial evidence that the KGB were behind the attempted assassination of John Paul, in St Peter's Square, in May 1981.

But by then the die was cast: changes in Russia and the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev meant that there would be no Soviet tanks on hand if the people of East Germany pushed for change. And so it was that at 11pm on 9th November 1989 the East German leaders opened the gates and East Berliners flooded through the wall for the first time since 1961. Just two years later, on December 8th 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev finally announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The cold war was, to all intents and purposes, a thing of the past.

Now no one would rightfully claim that it was Pope John Paul who ended the cold war single handedly. President Reagan's famous speech in June 1987, standing in the American sector of Berlin, in which he had said: *Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!* had also had a tremendous impact. And the outstanding courage of Lech Walensa and the Krakow Solidarity movement – and the millions of men and women who had played their small parts in resisting the Stasi and its equivalents throughout the Easter bloc - should also never be forgotten – and their dead commemorated today.

They fought a war, not in trenches or in pitched military campaigns – not in uniforms or in organized resistance cells – but largely as individuals, fired up by a Polish Pope quoting Isaiah: *Do not be afraid.* And they won the war and they won their freedom and they won their opportunity to have God back in their lives if they chose.

Today we remember. As in last night's hugely moving Act of Remembrance in the Royal Albert Hall, the poppies rained down as we recalled the loss of life in two world wars, in Korea and Burma, in Cyprus, in the Falklands, in the Gulf Wars, in Northern Ireland and in Afghanistan. The anniversary to which I have drawn your attention today is a different kind of war - not just because it was largely fought by civilians but because it lasted so long – at least 25years.

And it is different because of how the victory was accomplished: through that radical clarion call, *Do not be afraid* spoken by Isaiah, 800 years before Jesus and echoed at the beginning of our 1st reading: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them the light has shined.*

But I hope it also gives us a clue to the way that we build peace in our own day. Because there have been other forms of oppression and violence – in South Africa under Apartheid and in Northern Ireland in that period we call the Troubles, where there also seemed to be absolutely no hope that things would change. How long would the fires burn in Soweto or people be murdered by car bombs in Omagh?

It wasn't an army that got rid of white supremacy in South Africa; it wasn't actually a military solution that got Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness to sit down to talks in Belfast. What got them there were those words *Do not be afraid*.

For it is only when governments or regimes stop being afraid – as was the case in the Soviet Union and in East Germany - that progress towards reconciliation and peace could begin. And the fundamentals of that are the words of Jesus in today's Gospel: *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled – and do not let them be afraid.*

This is the transformation that Jesus offers and it what gives the Church its mandate: we are here to follow the steps of Pope John Paul in those dark and dangerous days 35 years ago offering the words: *Do not be afraid. God knows what he is doing and he knows the essence of human flourishing: freedom. Freedom to stand shoulder to shoulder with one another in solidarity – not because we will always agree, but because that is why we were made.*

As the 1st verse of today's Offertory Hymn says:

***Praise the Lord who brings us freedom,
tell it out to all the earth;
to the ones so long excluded
speak of hope and human worth.
All the darkness formed in warfare
cannot dim salvation's light:
for the broken and exploited
are the first in God's own sight.***

Break down the walls that separate us – and unite us in a single body...