

SERMON FOR REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY | 08.11.20

Genesis 22: 1-19; St Matthew 26: 36-46

This Passage from St Matthew is all too real. After a tough week in which the crowds turned out to welcome Jesus with palms and shouts of joy every bit as raucous and noisy as a Donald Trump rally on a good day, the storm clouds begin to gather. Behind the scenes Judas is plotting a rendezvous with the police attached to the Jewish Sanhedrin. How could they finally arrest Jesus - but out of sight? All the time Jesus can feel the disciples misreading everything he says to them and as a result they were either on cloud nine or down in the doldrums. And then there is Peter spluttering all kinds of promises which we know he won't keep. And all the time the net which the Jewish leaders are spreading gets worryingly close.

Jesus really is alone in a way that we haven't seen before. Up to now there has always been someone around to keep him company; but here, when the stakes are at their highest and Jesus is genuinely frightened of what is going to happen, not one of the disciples is sufficiently aware to be able to support him.

Can we feel the pressure he went through? Can we feel his sense of isolation and his worry that he wouldn't be up to the horrors that lay in front of him on Good Friday?

Equally, can we feel the terrible weight that lay on the shoulders of Abraham when, as a test of faith, God demands he take his only son up the mountain and offer him up as a sacrifice? As a father it is a bit like watching 24hours in A+E when a parent brings in their critically sick child. It almost physically hurts us as we sit and watch while the doctors surround the stretcher, doing all they possibly can - but inevitably leaving the adult to cope on their own. The A+E unit, the path up the mountain; there is no one and no where to break that over-arching sense of loneliness, the burden that no one else could share.

So too for the soldier. Their loneliness also involves scenarios which, God willing, none of us will ever have to meet. A telling play by Helen Benedict, 'Lonely Soldier monologues', recalls the challenges being met by women soldiers in Iraq.

There are lots of themes - problems with defective equipment and devious Contractors, the tedium of sitting around waiting for things to happen, the deadening effect of routine exposure to violent death, the unreasonable and petty tyrannies of superiors, the extremes of stress and isolation and an inability to trust anyone.

But the scene that challenged me most focused on the realization that to be effective in combat required a resolute refusal to acknowledge the basic humanity of the civilian population of Iraq. This was graphically conveyed by one soldier's recognition that in order to protect her comrades she might have to run over and shoot dead even women and children who might be about to set off IEDs, those lethal hidden land mines.

How could one possibly share that kind of experience, away from the scene where it took place? Who could wonder that these women were often overwhelmed by an extreme sense of loneliness. The play, using first hand interviews, reveals how most of these women were telling their stories for the very first time because it had not been possible for them to share these experiences with either other female comrades or their close families. Warfare is often thought of as a shared experience where 'group bonding' compensates (at least to an extent) for the fear of pain and death - to oneself or to those whom one is fighting. Yet for these women, military service had cornered them into an ever-diminishing sense of isolation - and silence.

Stephen Westerland's short poem expresses the range of thoughts going through the mind of a First World War soldier very well:

**Standing in trenches
living in fear every day,
missing those closest
thousands of miles far away.
Fighting for freedom
a mind over-wound,
a best mate lies motionless,
there on the ground.**

**Battles were fought
in the rain and the cold,
disease and depression
for the young and the old.
They fought for our futures
women, children and men
so let's voice our pledge that
we will remember them.**

Whether in the trenches of the Somme or in the exposed desert roads in Iraq; whether in front of a German military court for the English nurse Edith Cavell or in a stinking cell in Beirut endured for all those years by Terry Waite, John McCarthy and Brian Keenan, or in the depths of the Nigerian jungle for the women Edna O'Brien describes so well in 'Girl', the book that I described to you a few weeks back: for each the same was true. These challenges were faced head-on by people on their own. Like Abraham. Like Jesus.

How will we remember the fallen, those courageous men and women? Not in a group, by and large, but with that sickening realization that each of them felt themselves to be utterly alone at the moment of their greatest time of trial. As the graphic above says: War is hell.

Except for Christians for whom there is one redeeming ray of light. And while it isn't enough to take away the loneliness and to 'make it all better', it is what made the sacrifice possible for both Abraham and Jesus.

Even in the middle of his loneliness, Jesus fends off total despair with the words: *My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.*

The extent of human enduring remains extraordinary. Sometimes it is couched in nationalism and the words *Pro patria mori: for my country I will die.*

But for others who could so easily be overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness - or even a desire for revenge - there is a greater vision, a bigger reframing of the challenge and a desire to be more like Jesus: *Despite appearances I am not alone because where I am and what I am doing is part of a much greater picture which God alone has taken charge of.* However hideous these events, however likely it is that some will die, God weaves them still into the great network of new life and new possibilities - maybe known but more likely not.

And our role? To make sure these events are not forgotten but are made visible by our active determination to remember those who died for us in war:

**They fought for our futures
women, children and men
so let's voice our pledge that
we will remember them.**