

Sermon for Remembrance Sunday, 2022

St John's Camberwell, Victoria

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'We shall never forget November 11th, 1918.' So wrote Roscoe Wilson the Vicar of St. John's on the occasion of the signing of Armistice. A Jewish Rabbi once said: much of what the Bible demands can be comprised in one word, 'Remember.' For us who enjoy this Eucharistic tradition our remembrance is given voice in the sacred words of institution, the words of Jesus 'do this in remembrance of me.' They are words which are echoed in what has become an almost sacred refrain: 'Lest we forget.' Whilst today is set aside as 'Remembrance Sunday' for good reason, every Sunday is indeed concerned with remembrance.

As a server at St Peter's Eastern Hill, here in Melbourne, I often knelt in front of the high altar which was dressed in a frontal created as a war memorial. It shows a First World War Digger with the rising sun emblem behind his bandaged head, clearly suggesting a halo. But is it right that we draw these analogies between the sacrifice of Christ and the giving of one's life on the battlefield? Is it right that the altar a place where we are reconciled is used in this way? I think it is, but only if we consider the context of the Last Supper, the context in which we are called to remember . . . 'on the night he was betrayed.'

Christians have had, and continue to have, an uneasy relationship with conflict and war and it is right that we continue to be uneasy at the very least. I am unsettled every time I wear my uniform, when I am not, is probably the time to put my slouch hat away for good. You might rightly ask if I am so uneasy, surely my conscience dictates that I should not serve in the military... I wish it were that simple. Broadly speaking, throughout our history the Church has dealt with warfare in three ways: as Crusaders, as Pacifists or as advocates for Just War. We can lay aside the first, there is no place for crusade in the modern world, but what of the other two.

Clearly for the Hebrew people, peace or Shalom would come with the dawning of the Messianic age. We can see that in our reading this morning from Isaiah: 'In days to come' says the prophet, 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' Christians rightly have understood that Jesus is the bearer of the Messianic age, the Prince of Peace and from there many have adopted a Pacifist approach. However, I believe that whilst Jesus in his life, death and resurrection heralded the dawning of the new age, it has yet to come fully to fruition. We see that everywhere in our world do we not, a world marred not just by war, but by corruption, greed, prejudice and discrimination . . . by betrayal, and we respond.

The reality of our world is that we need a judiciary, police, and security forces, we need to, in the words of the psalm, 'Judge for the poor and fatherless: vindicate the afflicted and oppressed. Rescue the poor and needy: and save them from the hands of the wicked'. The question is 'How?' How do we respond. Just War theory would have us consider with utmost care the reasons behind our going to war; is our cause a just one and is our goal peace? And in the conduct of war are we protecting the vulnerable and is our response proportionate, there is no place for vengeance. What of our enemies are they afforded respect and care? I have seen many Afghan fighters in receipt of life saving medical attention.

When I became an Army Chaplain, particularly before I deployed to Afghanistan, I looked to those who had been there before me, those in whose footsteps I would walk, for inspiration. I quickly came across perhaps the most famous Army Chaplain of them all, Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, better known as 'Woodbine Willie.' But what drew me to Studdert Kennedy was his impact on others, surely the mark of the military chaplain. When I read his biography I became aware of another chaplain who had been influenced by him and who went on to serve at

Passchendaele, he became something of an inspiration to me, his name was Theodore Bayley Hardy.

Hardy had been a headmaster and the vicar of a rural parish in Cumbria. He joined the army in 1916 at the age of 51 and, when he arrived in France he sought out Studdert Kennedy, who had this advice for him: 'Live with the men. Go everywhere they go. The best place for a padre is where there is most danger of death.' Hardy took this to heart. He decided that his job would be in the trenches, when necessary, under fire. He soon showed his mettle. His Distinguished Service Order was earned when he went out to rescue a party of men stuck in the mud in no man's land. It was the beginning of the so-called 'battle of the mud', the Battle of Passchendaele, which began during one of the wettest summers on record. Without sleep and under murderous shellfire, Hardy went about his business with great calm and a kindly grin, a sight which kept the men from hysteria; his catch phrase—'it is only me.' He would go on to be awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to the wounded; no Padre had seen as much action as he had.

During the great German Spring offensive in 1918 Hardy went on a series of patrols and raids rescuing the wounded and marooned. One lad was stuck in the wire with a mangled leg. He was slowly bleeding to death when he heard 'it's only me' as Hardy came alongside. He tied up his wounded leg while discussing in whispers school cricket. He left the boy and soon returned as promised with a sergeant who snipped the wire, deadening the sound with a cloth so the German machine gun post wouldn't hear them. They got the lad back to safety—an incredible feat. The sergeant was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and Hardy the Victoria Cross.

When told he had won the VC he reportedly said: 'I really must protest' he would habitually cover the array of ribbons on his chest with his arm so as not to put off young recruits who might be intimidated and, although appointed chaplain to the King, Hardy refused to leave the front. He believed the best thing he could do was carry on, but inevitably his luck ran out. He was last seen crossing the River Selle on 10 October 1918 to join his men. The sound of a machine gun rang out and he was hit in the leg. He was evacuated but a few days later, pneumonia set in and he died just three weeks before the Armistice—to the great sorrow of his men and the army as a whole. He was the most highly decorated non-combatant of the Great War and was among the one hundred and sixty-three chaplains to die in action.

In the sixth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus is revealed as the Bread of Life, the one who stills storms, the one who speaks the words of eternal life, the one who will be betrayed. 'It's only me.' Words which might remind us of Jesus with his terrified disciples: 'It is I, do not be afraid.' The name Passchendaele is now part of our military history. Its name reminds us of the Passion of Christ and the great Christian narrative of hope and renewal through suffering and death. Hardy, like many of the chaplains of the Great War and those who have followed, have endeavoured, Christlike, to calm fears, to point beyond themselves, beyond the betrayal and suffering and in doing so have become a force for hope.

As once again we commemorate Remembrance Day when the guns fell silent on the Western Front. As we remember the awful toll of that war, the diabolical betrayal of a generation and the ongoing conflicts that mar our world, we set this in the context of the 'night he was betrayed.' Our remembrance today and the recitation of those words 'Lest we forget' is deficient if it is not coupled with a sense of reconciliation, repentance, *and* a sense of hope. In the same way that in our gathering this morning—and indeed every time we gather for the Eucharist—we have the opportunity to hear again those words of Jesus at the heart of the Eucharist: 'do this in remembrance of me;' and in doing so are involved in an act of reconciliation, repentance and hope.

To truly say 'Lest we forget' and 'do this in remembrance of me,' we recall that betrayal stands behind these remembrances, betrayals which call for repentance. But in true prophetic spirit let us also remember that those who indeed betrayed Jesus were offered his peace when they gathered in the upper room, a peace that is offered to us when we gather and remember that latent in any sacrifice offered for love, is the great hope of the resurrection. Lest we forget. Amen.