

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
The International Service of Remembrance to Commemorate the Centenary of the End of the
First World War
The Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Sunday, November 11, 2018

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17 | Psalm 127
Hebrews 9:24-28 | Mark 12:38-44

We gather here today, as people are gathering everywhere across the world, to commemorate the end of the First World War. In this historic moment we are conscious that we come together as representatives of countries who fought together and, in some cases, against each other. Some of our forebears were enemies then, even as we today, are now friends and allies. We are also conscious that, while this is a Christian Church and service, people of many faiths fought in this World War. Hindus and Muslims and Jews and people of several other faiths fought in the British Imperial Forces and, in the Central Powers, the very largely Muslim Ottoman Empire sacrificed over 13% of its whole population in the conflict. Only little Serbia lost a higher percentage of its people. Some of us here today are of different faiths too, some of us may put our faith in a secular or non-religious understanding of the world, perhaps some are not sure what they believe about God, eternity and the spiritual dimension of life. In any case, we are all human beings seeking to understand the world and our lives, and we are untied today across all the differences that divide us, in solemn remembrance and in genuine thanksgiving for the blessed silence that fell on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month 100 years ago, when that particular cataclysm of suffering and loss finally came to an end.

I suppose remembering is a big part of what we all do. Every house, in every country, I expect, has a side board or credenza not unlike the one in our living room. On it are a collection of pictures that tell the story of our life as a family. Children at various stages – A little girl standing by a snow man in the garden. A little boy with a make shift super hero's cape made out of an old curtain, a big truck under his arm – an expectant mum with the little girl hugging her bump (a theoretical love that didn't always last after the birth!) There is also a small cup for the greatest number of nominations for a school prize without actually winning one! All the faces are smiling and happy. Of course it wasn't always like that. If only our lives were like the pictures we take! Even so it is full of light to me; a memorial of all the years. On it too are pictures of family who are no longer with us. They are part of that light too, no less so for the fact the old pictures are black and white.

I also expect that our downstairs restroom is no different from most British military and ex-military families, full of the military pictures that are not allowed elsewhere in the house! This, I realize, may well be another peculiar quirk of the island race and some might be appalled that we do this. I can only say that, in our culture, it is long-suffering military spouses who tend to decide what goes on our walls. It is the price we pay for not being there half the time! Those pictures are often repetitive, it is true. Memories of Regiments and exercises and courses. Rows and rows of faces, and among them, there are faces of those who are gone. In one Infantry battalion I was chaplain of, two of the young faces in one of those pictures are of officers who died on operations. One in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. Both lovely men. Both excellent soldiers. Both great fun to be with.

Today we remember the thousands upon thousands of others like them from the wars and conflicts down the years, particularly this year, from the so called “Great War”. We think of the sideboards in houses up and down the land in all our countries with their pictures, and perhaps pause to think for a moment of all the pictures that are not there. The ones of all the children of those who died that were never born, and consequently, never had their pictures taken.

The sheer cost of it all can only be weighed, in a sense, by looking at our own sideboards and credenzas and asking what pictures we would be willing to give up?

The memorial on the stall I occupied when I was Chaplain at the Royal Memorial Chapel in the British Officer Academy at Sandhurst says it all. On a plaque on the side of the seat the four Anderson brothers of the Highland Light Infantry are remembered. Charles 1914, Alexander 1915, Edward in a flying accident on the 16 of March 1918 and, 9 days later, William on the 25th of March 1918 winning a Victoria Cross. The inscription reads, unbelievably, “A mother’s proud memory”.... Just unimaginable loss!

But the sideboards in our homes have other lessons to teach us too. For the light we see in our lives reflected there, is partly thanks to what they gave. Our sadness should be matched with gratitude too – though, being human beings, we doubtless find it hard. It is hard to be grateful for what you have. It is only in looking back, as we do today, at what we have lost that we learn to be grateful. On our own sideboards we see the loss of huge sections of our lives which we probably couldn’t wait to get over with at the time, but now, looking back, gosh (!), they are far more precious than we ever realized at the time. By doing what we are doing today, we, as peoples and nations, and as individual souls, remind ourselves to be thankful for what was sacrificed for our countries. For those of us who have served, or who are still serving in the military communities we belong to, we are perhaps more intimately grateful than most. For as people in the military community, we know we stand in the footsteps of those who died to keep the world free, and, by what we do today, we are perhaps more aware than most, of our duty to keep it so for our children.

The struggles of our age are more complex and the lengths we have, and no doubt, will have to go to keep what they won secure, may well lead us into situations they would find it hard to understand. We find them hard enough. What we do know, as they did too, is that there are always two struggles going on. On the one hand, we know that the conflicts of human beings are always tinged with self-interest, greed and the lust for power. On the other hand though, we also know, that the greater conflict of human life is fought, not on fields of blood and rain, but on the battlefields of every human heart. This greater conflict each one of us can win or lose by the choices we make and the lives we lead.

As the words of this poem “The young dead soldiers do not speak” by the American Poet Archibald MacLeish, say, it is up to all of us, to live the answer to their sacrifice.

The young dead soldiers do not speak
Nevertheless they are heard in the still house.
Who has not heard them?
They have a silence that speaks for them at night when the clock counts.
They say "We have given our lives but until it is finished,
No one can know what our lives gave."
They say "Whether our lives and our deaths are for peace and a new hope,
Or for nothing, we cannot say; It is you who must say this."
They say "We leave our deaths. Give them their meaning.
We were young, they say. We have died, remember us."

In this service we give thanks for an end to a terrible war, and we commend the fallen to God in our different faiths and different ways.

For the faith that inspired this Church to be built 200 years ago this year, there is, however, one more word to speak today. For when all the words in the world are spoken, and all are silent in the face of death and such terrible loss, then, if we listen, if we listen even now, we will hear the words of hope this service is duty bound to proclaim. For none of this is the last word. How could it be? Not all the struggles and trials of the world; not all the failures and brokenness of our lives; not all the lives like those we remember today, that were cut short, unfinished, or scarcely begun; not even these poor bodies of ours, which must all one day fail and lie in the dust. None of that is the last word.

The first and the last word spoken by the Church here in this place, is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the Christ of God. He is, the Church proclaims, the one that speaks when all other voices are drowned out by fear and doubt. The still small voice that could still be heard in the hell of the trenches, and is still heard wherever human beings struggle to be faithful in the face of suffering and fear.

In our service today you will have noticed that the silence was followed by a bugle call called Rouse (often mis-called Reveille). It is the call made to wake soldiers from sleep and to rouse them from their beds. In this service it is sounded to remind us of the trumpet of God that will sound at the last day to rouse all souls from the sleep of death to the new life of his Kingdom. Today we also rang the bell, as church bells were rung out across Europe at the Armistice, and are being rung across the world even as we speak. Today we are thankful for the end of war, for what was sacrificed by so many, and for the hope of new life in our world and in the world to come.

So we remember today not as men and women without hope but as those who seek to answer the question that hangs in the darkness of that still house where the dead soldiers do not speak. Was it worth it?

We answer it, not with words, for there are no words that could ever be spoken to answer that question, but we answer it with the light of our own lives and actions and service. By the way we live, by the way we love, by the faith we keep, by the good we uphold, by the service we offer, by the families we raise and by the choices we make, we seek to give their deaths meaning. That alone must be our answer.

So we commend our brothers and sisters to God. May they rest in peace and, through God's mercy, find the new life of his kingdom. May all of us here keep faith with those in whose footsteps we follow and, for those of us who choose him, keep faith with Jesus Christ, whom we have come to know as the way, the truth and the life.