

Remembrance Sunday

Sunday 8 November 2009

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Readings:

Hebrews 9: 24 -28

Psalm 62: 5 – 12

Mark 1: 14 – 20

Today is of course Remembrance Sunday a day when we remember those killed in not only the First and Second World Wars but in the many other wars that have raged since then right down to the current conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

This year is the 90th anniversary of the first Remembrance Day or Armistice Day, as it was known until the end of the Second World War, the day set aside to remember the ending of the First World War, on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month 1918.

On that first Remembrance Day, ninety years ago, Britain came to a standstill to honour the dead of the Great War. King George V had suggested that people observe two minutes of respectful silence to mark the first anniversary of the armistice: people were asked to remain silent at 11 o'clock, to cease activity, to stand with bowed heads and to think of the fallen.

But to unite the whole country in a moment of contemplation required some organisation, because, strange as it may seem, times were not fully standardized throughout the UK! To overcome this problem the silence was announced by maroons or church bells and it was universally observed.

Everything and everyone stopped: buses, trains, trams and factories halted; workers, students and pupils stood still. Court cases stopped, even the ships of the Royal Navy were stopped!

In this day and age we come to expect news as it actually happens and frequently we see the action, we are taken on patrol – and often hear the camera team told to take cover or to run! The First World War was quite different; communications were quite slow and often primitive – in some areas carrier pigeons were still being used, men often had to risk their lives to take messages to or from the front line.

Losses in WW1 battles were almost unbelievable thousands of lives on both sides being lost in a single day, e.g. on 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, the British Army endured the bloodiest day in its history, suffering 57,470 casualties and 19,240 dead.

During the 4 years of war approximately 750,000 British servicemen were killed and about 500,000 wounded - altogether 1,104,890 troops from Britain and the

Empire lost their lives. Just over 12% of the total number of British soldiers who served on the Western Front were killed or died, and nearly 38% were wounded.

About 10% of the population lost someone very close to them, for example a son, a brother or a husband, and many more lost friends, acquaintances and more distant relatives. Whole villages lost a generation of young men; men who went to school together, enlisted together and died together in the trenches were much if the fighting took place.

The battlefield was often a quagmire and the bodies of many who died simply sank into the mud, if they were found identification was often impossible. In the late 1980's bodies were still being found at the rate of 20 to 30 a week and even now approximately twenty sets of remains are found each year in what has become known as "The Harvest of Bones".

It was rare that bodies were brought home; the logistics and sheer number rendering it an impossible task, and so in France and Belgium there are numerous cemeteries where allied troops are buried – all immaculately kept even to this day. In addition around 300,000 soldiers are remembered on memorials to the missing in France & Belgium, these are the men who were killed in action but have no known grave.

Visiting such cemeteries is a very moving experience as we found out four years ago when we visited France and managed to find the Sandpits British cemetery in Pas de Calais where an uncle of mine was buried – almost certainly the first member of the family to actually visit the grave.

Sandpits cemetery lies on the outskirts of a small village close to a motorway on the edge of a small wood. As you walk up the path to the cemetery there are some worrying signs around the edge of the cemetery, warning of the danger of unexploded ammunition!

The beautiful cemetery contains just 394 burials.

Nowadays it is expected that the bodies of those killed in action are returned to the UK for burial and, unfortunately it is a regular occurrence.

An all too familiar item on our TVs and in our newspapers is news of the death of one of our troops in Afghanistan – followed by those dreaded words 'next of kin' have been informed.

This is followed by the pictures of the body of one of our troops killed in action arriving back at Brize Norton in Wiltshire.

Then there are the very moving images of the funeral cortege passing through the streets of Wootton Bassett, lined with people paying their respects – friends, family, fellow troops, town dignitaries and ordinary members of the public, young and old.

The two great wars were thought as wars to end all wars but that has not been the case! Between 1944 and 2000 there were no less than 49(!) wars and since 2000

there have been 2 Gulf Wars as well as the Afghanistan conflict and many other 'squabbles' taking place around the world!

To many the current fighting in Afghanistan and many of the other conflicts taking place around the world are pointless and not justifiable. The world of conflict changed on 9/11 2001, when those two passenger jets were crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, New York, a third hit the Pentagon in Washington DC and a fourth was crashed by passengers in a field in Pennsylvania to prevent it too being used as a giant missile of destruction.

These concerted attacks on democracy more than any other acts I think show the level of evil in the world. There are of course many other smaller examples that have hit the headlines recently:

- The shooting of 5 British troops by an Afghan they were training and therefore considered a friend
- The bodies of 11 women found in a house in the USA all killed by one man
- The recent examples of child pornography in the UK and elsewhere
- The army psychiatrist killing 13 and wounding 28 soldiers in the USA
- Suicide bombings in Pakistan and other countries.

Just a few examples but they show the level of evil and depravity to which mankind has fallen. And it was because of the sin of mankind God sent his only Son.

Many of the soldiers killed in the First World War were volunteers responding to Kitchener's poster 'Your Country Needs You!' They responded not really knowing what they were letting themselves in for, they did it out a sense of duty to their country – to save the country from the evil forces of Germany and its allies.

In the reading from Mark's Gospel we see Jesus calling his disciples – and he was also calling them to give their lives to fight. To fight the greatest enemy of all - the devil and the forces of evil! Like those recruits of Kitchener's little did they know what they were letting themselves in for, and several of them, just like those troops, would have their lives cut short through serving the Lord.

We too follow in the footsteps of those first disciples as soldiers of Christ ('An army of ordinary people') called to fight a long and difficult battle, but we fight to save people not to kill! It is a battle that has raged since creation and will continue to rage until Christ's second coming.

I was told a while ago that churches no longer talk about the devil, because people don't like to hear about him – many don't believe there is such a beast! But like it or not the devil and the forces of evil are all around us, just as they were in Jesus' time!

The devil is a bit like a chameleon he takes many guises depending upon the circumstances around us, prowling just waiting to pounce when he spots a weakness in us. We should not be complacent about the devil but remember that he tempted Jesus so there is no doubt he will also tempt us!

Christians around the world are facing persecution at a level unprecedented in history, just look at these few examples of persecution over the last 12 – 18 months:

- Andulo, Angola - three church buildings burned 4 Christians assaulted, school-age daughter of a deacon beheaded.
- Jos, Nigeria - Hundreds of Christians killed and an estimated 7,000–10,000 fled their homes after rioting, started by Muslims, Christian homes burnt, churches vandalised, clergy attacked and killed.
- Orissa, India - at least 50 Christians murdered, some burnt alive, others cut to pieces, 300 villages cleansed of Christians, with homes, churches, relief camps and even orphanages razed to the ground by Hindu extremists.
- Somalia - A 22-year-old Somali Christian convert from Islam murdered while attending a Muslim wedding
- Uzbekistan – owning a Bible became illegal.
- Xinjiang, China – A local Christian church leader held for over a year, family not allowed to see him.

Even in our own country Christianity is coming under increased attack with people being prevented from openly showing their belief in Christ by wearing the cross or by praying for people.

A country as religious as Italy is not immune to these attacks - the European Court of Human Rights ruled this week that crucifixes in Italian schools violate the religious rights of both children and parents!

We should not be under any illusion that these are isolated incidents but like those 9/11 incidents are all part of a concerted attack – but an attack on the Christian faith and the author of these attacks? - none other than the devil for he has much to gain – and knows he has so much to lose if he doesn't stop the spreading of the Gospel of Christ!

He lost the first battle with Christ, when Jesus unceremoniously rejected his temptations and he lost the next battle when Jesus overcame death and rose again! The devil is doing his utmost not to lose the final battle when Jesus 'comes a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him!' (Hebrews 9: 28)

We hear almost daily people saying the war in Afghanistan will be a long and bloody one, a war that cannot be won. We hear also much criticism about the troops not being correctly equipped for the fight. But we also hear from the government that it is a battle we must win for our very future existence depends on a successful outcome.

Likewise the battle against the devil is also a long and difficult one, and it is one that we must win for our future lives depend upon it!

Do we have the right equipment to win the battle? Well we have Jesus on our side and if we do as Paul said in Ephesians then we will win through:

"Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." (Ephesians 6: 11 – 18)

In the fight against the devil and the forces of evil there will be casualties just as there were in the two Great Wars and in all the other conflicts down through the ages. But with God on our side we will win through of that there can be no doubt!

So on this Remembrance Day, as we remember those who have given up their lives for their country in an attempt to keep us free and make the world a better place, let us also remember all those, who down through the ages, have given up their lives for Christ and pray that we too will be faithful soldiers of Christ.