

Remembrance Sunday 2018
100 years since the end of the First World War

At chess club here on a Sunday evening we teach the kids their “chess levels” – a bit like the grades you may have taken when learning a musical instrument as a child.

One of the things the children need to learn is the difference between a blunder and a sacrifice:

A sacrifice is giving up something for a greater good.

A blunder is just a mistake.

I do wonder whether the First World War was a sacrifice or a blunder?

Maybe it was both...

A blunder by the monarchies and governments of year, who could and should have done more to live in peace.

A blunder by the military top brass who confidently predicted getting the boys home by Christmas.

Maybe even a blunder by those who so readily signed up for King and Country and to bash the Hunn.

And yet at the same time a tremendous sacrifice made by so many ordinary people; those who gave up home and family to go and fight for those they loved and the things they believed in...

...those who paid the ultimate price of giving up their lives, or perhaps even worse who lived on with scares and wounds too great for anyone to bear.

Remembrance Sunday always makes me think of Jesus:

“Greater love hath no man than this...that he lay down his life for his friends”,
Said Jesus on the night before he died.

Was Jesus’ death a blunder or a sacrifice?

Maybe again both:

A blunder by the religious authorities who simply could not accept who Jesus was and what he said.

A blunder by the people who were too easily persuaded to cry, ‘crucify him’

A blunder by Pontius Pilate, too weak to stand up to them and to take heed of his wife's warning to have nothing to do with Jesus.

And yet a sacrifice:

For God the Father willingly gave up to death the one he loved most,
Jesus freely embraced his crucifixion,
To achieve the greater good to providing a way for God to reconcile a fallen
humanity to himself for all time.

I do find it hard to get excited about celebrating the end of the First World War.

I'm sure at the time there was great rejoicing.

But surely it must have been more at a sense of relief that at last this was over,
rather than any sense of jubilation – the cost was just too high.

Maybe I could be more excited about celebrating the end of the first world war
if it had remained, as it was called at the time – the Great War; the war to end
all wars.

But the sad reality was that within a generation we were plunged into yet
another bloody conflict.

Yet more pain and suffering.

And so it has gone on, even to the present day.

It's not that I don't think war is sometimes a necessary evil.

We've all found ourselves in situations where there is no right answer.

We must simply find the least worse solution, pray for forgiveness and pursue
it.

Surely the second world war was one of those occasions.

I recently read a case for the West to engage in more military intervention, not
less.

It was a compelling case:

When, for example an impoverished African country manages to elect an
honest civilian government, the West should guarantee the security of that
Government; making it clear that if a coup is attempted the West will step in
and squash it.

Then instead of the African government spending its precious resources on arms to defend itself or to keep the military on side, it could use its resources on education, health care and improving the economy – lifting people out of poverty and giving them a chance in life.

In turn, the likelihood of a coup would decrease.

Might we argue that this would be a way in which the West could ‘love its neighbour’ as Jesus urged us to do?

But then, it’s not me or my children who would be required to go and fight... and possibly not return home.

I don’t imagine that its something particularly bothering many of you this morning, but as a clergyman of the Church of England here is something else I do give thought to:

Why does the church in the West seem to be in such decline?

Its not a recent thing.

Church attendance in the UK has been in decline now for over 100 years.

I don’t think the decline in church attendance is inevitable.

Around the world; in African, Asia, South America vast numbers of people are flocking to Jesus.

Even in North America Christianity has remained surprisingly strong – although I do wonder how comfortable Jesus might be with some expressions of faith in the United States.

In our own country, there have been periods of decline in Christianity followed by reversals and great awakenings and revivals.

Might the decline in Europe over the last century of those with an active faith in Jesus have something to do with the suffering our continent has endured?

It is often said that there are few atheists on a battle field.

Some might dismiss this as no more than a product of fear and a clutching at straws in desperate circumstances.

Bear Grylls, himself an ex-SAS serviceman and now TV adventurer has gone on record as saying that if people accuse him of turning to Christianity as grabbing for a crutch that’s ok with him. A crutch helps you stand tall and to walk.

Over 40 million New Testaments were given to soldiers during the First World War.

Many soldiers found in God's Word courage and hope; even the courage to take tremendous risks and even die, knowing that Jesus was preparing them a place and would welcome them into his home where death and suffering are no more.

But could it be that for those returning from the horrors of the front and for those who waited behind, hoped and prayed and whose loved ones never made it back; faith became impossible.

How could a loving God have allowed this to happen?

Horror, I think can do one of two things.

It can either cause us to give up on a loving God; as Stephen Fry has so publicly done in the last couple of years.

Or it can drive us into the arms of a loving God; to find comfort, hope and strength; a bit like the woman I recently heard speak who had kept her faith through the barbaric regime of a North Korean 're-education' centre; and even started a small 'church' in the toilets – the only place where the guards were not on constant watch.

I guess none of us know how we will react until (and God forbid that it should ever happen) we find ourselves in those circumstances.

You may disagree with me, but I do worry for our society as it drifts, or even runs, further and further from its Christian moorings.

It's only my personal observation, but so many of our country's village halls and scout huts seem to have been built after the end of the First World War.

The national health service was launched at the end of the Second.

Did those who endured the Great War have a vision for a society in which community mattered?

Did those who fought Hitler have a vision for a society in which every citizen could access basic services and healthcare?

What is our vision today as a society today?

Across the pond, Donald Trump has of course grabbed much of the world's attention. He seems to be generating much fear. Or perhaps he is just tapping into the fears that many Americans already have.

But it seems that Bishop Michael Curry, who preached at Prince Harry and Megan Markell's wedding is, albeit to a lesser extent, generating much interest too – with a message of love.

Love, which the bible says, casts out all fear.

If we think love might provide us with a better way to order our society; to give meaning and hope, then the best place to see it is in Jesus –

“We know what love is because God first loved us”

“Greater love hath no man that this, that he lay down his life for his friends”.

It is as we experience God's love in Jesus.

As, following Jesus, we love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength,

That we learn to love our neighbour as ourselves,

And so build a land fit for heroes.

Jesus warned his followers that there would always be wars; until he returned in glory to put an end to this world and make a new, better one.

But he also gave them a vision of a kingdom, not like those of this world.

It is a kingdom that might start small – even as small as a mustard seed.

It is a kingdom of love, joy and peace;

A kingdom that reflects the character of its king: Jesus.

One hundred years since the end of the First World War....

We have so much to be thankful for in this country.

But it has been hard won.

Let's not forget those who have made the lives we have today possible.

And let's not neglect to play our part, in building a world worthy of the sacrifice that others made on our behalf.

In Jesus name,

Amen