

Sermon for Remembrance Sunday 8th November 2015 – King’s College, Cambridge
The Rt. Revd. Dr. Robert Innes – Bishop of the Church of England Diocese in Europe

Mic. 4:5: ‘They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.’

Each of us brings our own personal history to our experience of Remembrance Sunday. My own perspective is that, although thoroughly British, I have lived for the last 10 years in Belgium, the country where so many allied soldiers in both the great wars lost their lives. As bishop, I am responsible for our Anglican Church of St. George in Ypres – the city horribly annihilated in World War 1 and later wonderfully rebuilt as a city of peace. Hundreds of thousands of British visitors come to Ypres each year to learn and to remember.

Remembrance on the continent is complex. Belgium suffered the experience of occupation. Hugo Claus’s iconic book ‘The Sorrow of Belgium’ charts the painful ambiguities of a Flemish village in World War 2, where some actively collaborated, a few resisted and most just accommodated themselves to the reality of occupation as best they could.

From a continental perspective, the British experience of remembrance is one that has been spared some of the painful ambiguities associated with remembrance further east. For Europe is a continent whose peoples were not always on the side of the angels and where remembrance brings to mind destruction and defeat along with liberation and victory.

A fortnight ago, I visited our Anglican church in Leipzig, in the former East German Democratic Republic. Walking around its central streets, I became aware that Leipzig is a city in which the complexity of remembrance is vividly portrayed in its public buildings.

- The renaissance town hall: a joyous celebration of the synthesis of Christian and classical values from which modern Europe grew – a building proudly proclaiming: ‘unless the Lord builds the house those that build it labour in vain’.
- St. Thomas’s Church: where JS Bach composed much of his music and founded a musical tradition to which this chapel is greatly indebted
- The building site, where the former Anglican church once stood, before it was accidentally demolished by British war-time bombers
- The much loved Jewish sweet shop, destroyed in Kristallnacht
- The deeply moving memorial to the 14,000 Jews deported and executed during what is called ‘the fascist terror’
- More recently: the drab Soviet brutalist architecture from the GDR era
- And finally, St. Nicholas church: where in 1989 2000 people gathered each week to pray for freedom. Their slogan: ‘swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks’. Their prayerful influence, and that of others like them, brought to an end the repressive regime and the hated Stasi. As a former GDR Central Committee member commented: “We had planned everything. We were prepared for everything. But not for candles and prayers.”

Remembrance has many aspects: thankfulness for those who gave their lives for our freedom, sorrow for the tragedy and destruction of war. It also includes a forward looking dimension. We remember so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past and to build institutions that make for peace.

European leaders responded to the slaughter of two world wars by vowing that the major European powers would never again use their industrial strength to fight one another. The coal and steel industries of France and Germany were placed under a single 'high authority'. It was the first truly supra-national European institution. Several of the instigators of this authority were Christian men inspired by their Roman Catholic faith: Schuman, Adenauer, de Gasperi. They sought to give physical expression to the Christian values of forgiveness, reconciliation and peace-making. It was these values that were at the heart of the institutions which ultimately become our European Union. The motto 'ever closer union' was formulated as an expression of the desire of European peoples to live together in community and solidarity with one another.

70 years after the ending of WW2 we live in a very different context. Europe faces a different set of challenges. How can Europe's peoples flourish in a globalised economy, in the face of competition from superpowers and emerging superpowers and where both capital and people seem more mobile than ever before? The prospect of internal conflict has receded. But it has been replaced by other threats. Europe today faces a situation of war in the East - in Ukraine - and massive instability to the South and East - in the Middle East. The migration crisis is possibly the biggest threat the European Union has faced since its foundation. As I talk to senior European leaders, there is I have to tell you, a sense of real anxiety about what the future holds. A senior EU vice president recently compared the current time to 1913: all was peaceful, but the following year an unthinkable cataclysm was unleashed.

Our own country of Britain has an honourable tradition of democracy and freedom, values which were bravely defended at great cost during the wars of the 20th century. Britain could – and I believe should - play a leading role in helping Europe confront the grave challenges which it faces today. I am sorry to say to you that in Brussels I frequently meet the perception that Britain seems too often happier merely to comment and to complain from the sidelines.

“They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” The words of the prophet Micah have echoed down the centuries as an injunction and an inspiration to peace making. Peace does not happen automatically by default. It has to be worked out through the building of institutions that will enable nations to commit to common purposes and to resolve their differences in co-operative ways.

On this Remembrance Sunday, we give thanks for those who gave their lives in the great conflicts of the 20th century and in this century for the cause of peace. We are conscious of the European origins of the world wars; as we are aware too of Europe's increasing interconnectedness and interdependence. So I close with words from an Anglican divine of another age, that speak still with prophetic clarity to our own time

*No man is an island entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.*

*If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were,
as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were.*

*Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never
send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.¹*

¹ from *MEDITATION XVII Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* John Donne