A Sermon in King's College Chapel

'Their sacrifice must be made worthwhile'

In August 1919 the vicar of a Nottingham parish who had been a chaplain in the trenches during the First World War wrote in his parish magazine,

> Now that we have peace, what are we going to do? Perhaps we can best sum up what we ought to do in one word 'remember'. Remember that the war will have been lost if after all the evil spirit of selfishness and self-seeking triumphs over the spirit of service and duty.[1]

The Reverend A. R. Browne-Wilkinson MC, also wrote that 'we cannot discharge out duty to [the hundreds and thousands of our gallant dead] by erecting memorials of brick and stone, the only memorial worthy of them is the building up of that new order in the world for which they died.'

The activity of remembering is still understood to be important today. People who have no personal memories of conflict are increasingly inclined to stop for two minutes or to attend a special outdoor service. But what is the good of 'remembering'?

Remembrance today seems to be an activity so spiritual and religious that it stands quite to one side of our political concerns. And yet in the days after the First World War it was often seen as part of an earnest desire and struggle to create a better society. For instance, many of the clergy who had seen what war is like at first hand took the view that it was such a huge humanitarian mistake that the only decent way to live with the terrible knowledge that they had acquired was to become a pacifist. That deeply principled response was hugely challenged by the rise of fascism in the 1930s. Some remained pacifists as the Second World War drew closer and progressed, but many felt that the world could not afford such high-mindedness and that, with great reluctance, it was necessary to fight a force as ruthless and evil as Nazism with the full powers of military engagement.

[1] All quotations here are from 'Shell Shocked Prophets' by Linda Barker (Hellion and Co 2015)

There were other tensions too. Some have argued that former military chaplains, such as our aforementioned Nottingham vicar, engaged with remembrance activities with a particular agenda in mind, namely to 'inculcate dissatisfaction, guilt and discomfort' as part of a strategy to 'encourage and mobilise efforts to transform society as a means of honouring the dead'. For as well as seeing suffering in the trenches the chaplains had also seen hope and idealism.

> Many of those who gave their lives for England gave them not for the England of 1913 or 1914, but for England as she might be, as one day she shall - please God - become. For that ideal they have gladly died. In that hope and faith those of us who have survived must live and work. Their sacrifice must be made worthwhile.

This political and reformist approach to remembrance was not the only one of course. Perhaps the most deeply religious or sacralising approach was taken by those Anglican clergy who theologised the sacrifice made in the trenches to such an extent that they encouraged others to see it as comparable with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross; so much so, in fact, that their view has been summarised as the belief that the world was redeemed by the blood of soldiers. A corollary of this eccentric, not to say heretical, view is that personal salvation resulted from sacrificial death in battle.

Such ideas, taken together with the projects that were developing to make war memorials and so on, were deprecated by some as merely providing comfort and consolation. They were seen as a weak-spirited acceptance of the unacceptable and a feeble acquiescence into a complacent attitude in the face of the huge social problems that were beginning to unfold in the 1920s.

These various strands in the debate about how to remember and do justice to the sacrifice of war continued through the twentieth century. Eventually they were crystallized out into a decision, for those who wanted to wear poppies, as to whether they should go along with the Royal British Legion and wear a red poppy or should seek out and sport a white poppy in a spirit of resistance against the forces that would too easily see people sacrificed on the altar of failed politics.

Any inclination I have ever had to branch out in the white poppy direction has been curtailed by a number of factors. Family memory and loyalty for one - an uncle who was killed in the last months of the Second World War; another uncle who was badly wounded and never got the treatment that might have led to a recovery as he struggled to survive in POW camps; an aunt who was a Queen Alexandra nurse on hospital ships in the Indian ocean; a grandfather who though not a fighting man was three times rescued from a life-raft having been torpedoed in the Atlantic as a marine engineer in the Merchant Navy. Such respect and loyalty shouldn't stand in the way of a courageous personal choice, of course, but my experience of the Royal British Legion's commitment to welfare and compassion had a big effect on me when embarking on parish ministry as a young vicar. It was at that point that I realized that I had to decide whether to side with the clergy who saw Remembrance Day as an act of social and civic responsibility or with those who saw it as their Christian vocation to speak up for a more excellent way and be critical of populist remembrance activities. The result was that I became the padre to the local branch of the Royal British Legion sharing responsibility for huge outdoor gatherings, however ambiguous and varied the reasons people had for being there.

But I have become clear about this: just as the Royal British Legion would be a problematic organisation if it were not as committed to welfare as it is to parades and wreath-laying, so our own involvement in remembering is problematic if it is not as concerned about the lives of the living as it is about the deaths of the war dead.

Clearly it is a good thing if the leaders of our main political parties can stand shoulder to shoulder in an Act of Remembrance, and participating wreath-laying should always be an inclusive activity, for we all have a right to remembrance. But as we remember the consequences of war we fool ourselves, and undermine our own activity, if we do not also reflect on the causes of war.

War is often, if I may repeat a phrase I used earlier, a result of failed politics. People fight when they have lost patience with speech. The reason I am not a pacifist is that there are those who will become aggressive without a cause other than their own deranged and hubristic desire for domination. Such evil must be resisted by

whatever means are proportionate and likely to be effective. But other conflicts emerge because political visions or strategies or tactics seem irreconcilable and people give up on the laborious business of negotiation. They stop talking and start fighting.

As well as being a break from politics, our acts of remembrance should return us to the *reason for* politics and the deepest roots of our political ideals and hopes. It is an irony beyond imagination that as levels of wealth and standards of living have risen to a point where they have surpassed the wildest expectations of those who were in our shoes a century ago, so our own political and social vision has become ever more focused on economic growth and personal prosperity. That is not enough to honour the countless sacrifices made in the twentieth century.

As I read though the words, and feel the passionate care, of those who tried to interpret the meaning of the First World War in the years of aftermath I am in awe of their social and political passion. This is not because of any particular policy, but because of their overarching and egalitarian desire to create a world where war would be no more, and where peace would not only be peaceful, but just. For the God who longs for peace also longs for justice – and as we pray for the one we must actively seek the other.

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1 Kings 3. 1-5; Romans 8.31-end