

## Homily – 32 (B) Remembrance 2018

*“She, from the little she had, has put in everything she possessed.”*

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Another quote:

*Europe today is a powder keg and the leaders are like men smoking in an arsenal ... A single spark will set off an explosion that will consume us all ... I cannot tell you when that explosion will occur, but I can tell you where ... **Some damned foolish thing in the Balkans will set it off.***

Otto von Bismark, German 1878

And another quote:

“As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.’” Luke 19:41-42

Today, it is our privilege to celebrate Remembrance Sunday, and to commend to God all those who lost their lives in the defence of their country in war. We remember, in particular, those members of our parish who lost their lives in the First and Second World Wars, and we also remember the victims of conflict, whoever they are.

We do not glorify war today. As Christians we seek to preach a Gospel of peace and reconciliation, but we also do not hesitate to salute those who surmounted great obstacles to do their duty and to protect the country and the people that they loved. From their example we draw a wider encouragement that God will take the little that we have and, not only help us to make the most of it, but also give us gifts of strength and endurance for which we did not dare to ask. The widow of Sidon was just there, prepared to give everything that she had, without even the blessing of hope. How many servicemen and servicewomen have been in that position, I wonder?

Yet we do more than that. On this solemn anniversary, we stare war in the face. We weigh it. It is our duty to do so. We weigh the damage to hearts and souls that has been made by war. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, this morning, we read that Christ does not have to offer himself again and again, like the priest going

into the sanctuary. In the absolute sense of his salvific act this is, of course, true, but in his people Christ continues to suffer, wherever there is conflict, and wherever there are victims. Where one war ends, another begins. Where one wall is torn down, another is raised up. Where one conflict is resolved, another festers. This suffering is not God's will for his people, and we, the Church, pray above all for peace in a world that is in great danger of forgetting what war can do, in a world which does not know those things that make for peace.

Forgetting is our enemy, remembrance is our friend. It schools us to recognize the things that make for peace.

I looked back at my family history and see that my relatives were a pretty average bunch as far as suffering from war is concerned. My paternal grandfather survived the First World War, but was seriously wounded and died young, aged 50, in 1946, from a cancer that grew in the wound in his shattered shoulder that never really healed. My father just managed to get back from his war to see him before he died. My mother's father was, I think, in a reserved occupation in the First World War. My great-uncle Joseph survived the hostilities but died of influenza on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 1918 while still serving in France. He is buried in Caudry British Cemetery. Another great-uncle, this time on my mother's side, died at Ypres in March 1917. Between them, they are a picture of a generation fractured by war.

That's the little picture from the point of view of my Remembrance. Now for the bigger picture. I read somewhere, that the people of France had suffered more than the British in terms of casualties, so I tried to verify that. Great Britain lost around 2% of its population, France lost almost one in twenty of its population and the country was seriously weakened in the post-war years by the loss of skills and manpower. But, goodness me, if you look a little further... Germany lost about 4%, Austro-Hungary a little less. Russia, numerically, suffered terribly, losing over 3,000,000 of its citizens, but that was only less than 2% of its population. Serbia, the cauldron where it all began, had as many as 1,250,000 casualties, and that represented up to an astonishing 27% of population. If the 5% of the French population being killed in the war is deemed to have been a catastrophic social and economic loss, what would 27% represent for a country? These figures are not accurate, of course. There was a war on! A war which destroyed infrastructure, records, persons and memories. But the sheer scale of the numbers involved gives us plenty to work on for our Act of Remembrance.

I've spoken about my father and his war before. My father was very much an extrovert and his extreme deafness did not stop him from being outgoing, friendly and huge show-off. He loved attention and he loved an audience. The

only thing that he didn't talk about was the war that he went through. My mother said that for many years he was shouting orders in his sleep and he never did sleep well after his war. He sometimes referred to places he liked or recalled peaceful times abroad. "When I was in India" was something of a refrain, but only talking about the food and the servants. He never, ever spoke of the fighting. At all. Only once, in a sombre mood, possibly having drunk too much of his excellent home-made beer, did he look at me and say "Son, I have killed a lot of men. An awful lot of men." And then he fell silent for a long time.

Remembrance is our friend. Let us praise and give thanks for those who gave their lives to do their duty to their country. Let us remember the scars borne by those who survived and let us look the suffering in the face and determine that nothing we do shall allow such dreadful things to happen again.

Here are some words of the Revd Geoffrey Ankstell Studdert Kennedy, a First World War military chaplain known as 'Woodbine Willie', from his poem "What's the good?".

But I keeps on allus askin'  
What's the good and who's to gain?  
When ye've got 'a plain objective'  
Ye can fight your fight and grin,  
But there ain't no damned objective,  
And there ain't no prize to win.  
We're just like a lot of bullocks  
In a blarsted china shop,  
Bustin' all the world to blazes,  
'Cause we dunno 'ow to stop.  
Trampling years of work and wonder  
Into dust beneath our feet,  
And the one as does most damage  
Swears that victory is sweet.  
It's a sweet as turns to bitter,  
Like the bitterness of gall,  
And the winner knows 'e's losin'  
If 'e stops to think at all.  
I suppose this ain't the spirit  
Of the Patriotic man.  
Didn't ought to do no thinkin',  
Soldiers just kill all they can.  
But we carn't 'elp thinkin' sometimes,  
Though our business is to kill,  
War 'as turned us into butchers,

But we're only 'uman still.  
Gawd knows well I ain't no thinker,  
And I never knew before,  
But I knows now why I'm fightin',  
It's to put an end to war.  
Not to make my country richer  
Or to keep her flag unfurled,  
Over every other nation  
Tyrant mistress of the world.  
Not to boast of Britain's glory,  
Bought by bloodshed in her wars,  
But that Peace may shine about her,  
As the sea shines round her shores.