

Remembrance Sunday

A sermon given on the Remembrance Sunday, 13th November October 2022 – by Father Paul McCourt, in Beverley Minster

John 15:12-17

At this time of the year, as the leaves fall to the ground outside this magnificent building, there is something very special in the air on the morning of Remembrance Sunday, the Sunday closest to the 11 November - the day we call Armistice Day. Here is the day when at the very hour of 11 o'clock, military units, veterans, along with wider society, represent the whole nation as we pause to do something unique and deeply poignant: we stop momentarily; we stand still; we fall silent, as did the guns of war when the clock struck eleven on the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918. The world had known four bitter years of the 'war to end all wars' as it became known, and counted the cost in lives lost, in families devastated, in countries on their knees, a situation never known or experienced on such global scale in the whole history of humanity. It's impossible for us to imagine what world communities have gone through with multiple nations at war with one another, and then to imagine the aftermath and the rebuilding of trust across the globe.

What is of note was the immediate desire never to forget the terrible human cost of the previous four years. In Britain, here we hurriedly built a memorial as a focal point for people across the nation and the then empire to visit out of gratitude and see all the names and memories of so many in a place which is central to the capital. A wooden cenotaph was erected for that purpose, to be replaced a year later in 1920, by the one that we see today in Whitehall, made of Portland stone, the same stone used for the headstones of British and Commonwealth servicemen and women lost in war and active service ever since. The cenotaph was replicated by many local memorials in almost every church, village, town and city across the nation, as there was barely a single corner of the country that had not lost someone from their community. Even this Minster church, built throughout the 13th century, having stood here through times good and bad, times of plenty and austerity, times of peace and war, remained somewhat immune until, of course, the scale and reach of the Great War struck home. That acknowledgment was so deep that a whole quadrant of this magnificent building was, for the first time in its entire history, dedicated to the memory of such extraordinary response, extraordinary courage, extraordinary selflessness and ultimately loss. Never before had the Minster been dedicated in such a way.

As if that were not enough, the country was called to arms again just over 20 years later, when another six devastating years witnessed a second World War. The cenotaph was rededicated in 1946 to encompass that and to remember forever the endurance that had relentlessly stood once more against an evil ideology for so long. From then, it has become the rightful focus for remembering every soul lost in all military campaigns since.

And this year of course, we think particularly of those who died 40 years ago in the Falklands War of 1982; and most obviously with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth firmly in our prayers at this, the first Remembrance Weekend without her as our monarch and Head of State and commander-in-chief; with Ukraine very much in mind and the plight of courageous civilians and military in that appalling situation there is much to bring to remembrance this weekend.

Parades today, both locally and nationally do not glorify war or loss, should anyone be in any doubt about that. What is done today is the most fitting and formal tribute we can possibly pay to that innate human desire to rescue global situations and protect national interest from viable threat, even to the point of laying down life to achieve it. Surely this has a direct resonance with the life of Jesus who in the Gospel there tells us to lay down our life for our friends and whose example of self-sacrifice brought him, the Son of God, to the cross of crucifixion, the conquest of death and the glory of the resurrection - for that is what Christians believe.

Therefore, what we do as a society today, Remembrance Sunday, is an annual salute to that basic instinct, that human instinct to protect peace and all who live by it; to protect life in all its ages against threat; and to live by principles so hard won in times past. For all of this and more we say to them who paid the ultimate sacrifice, "*Thank you.*"

And finally, a prayer from St. John Henry Cardinal Newman. If I can invite you to close your eyes:

*May Christ support us all the day long
till the shadows lengthen and the evening comes
and the busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over and our work is done.
Then in his mercy, may he give us safe lodging and holy rest
and peace at the last.*

*Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord
and let perpetual light shine upon them.
And may they rest in peace.
Amen.*

Reading Texts

John 15:12-17

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."