

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY 2009

Sermon preached by Canon Ray Nichols

It is Remembrance Sunday on an RAF Station.

After the Service the Chaplain joins his colleagues in the Mess for a pre-lunch drink. "Good sermon, Padre," says the CO, "but how is it that you got through the whole thing without any mention of the war?"

"I wasn't born, Sir," was the Padre's answer, "I wasn't there".

"You're going to have the same trouble at Christmas," the CO replied.

The story enables me to stress that Remembrance Sunday is not simply about what we can remember. If that were so our ever-decreasing number and the next generation or two would quietly do away with it.

Of course many of us have memories. You no doubt have yours. I can only recall my own. After being bombed out of our house in East London I can still recall the sound of the sirens going the next afternoon as we sheltered in a friend's house across the road. The dull, sinister hum of German bombers on their way. The dreadful silence after the flying bomb's engine cut out and you wondered where it would hit.

I can still remember ship-mates, and the sound in the engine room as the ship's hull plates rang with exploding depth charges in the North Atlantic. When the Falklands war came I did not find it difficult to picture the Second Engineer and a Junior trapped in the engine room of the Sir Galahad, with a swirling blanket of fire and fumes above them. There was one smoke mask between them. The Second Engineer gave it to the junior officer and told him to get out. When they towed the Sir Galahad out to sea and sank her in the South Atlantic they committed to the deep at least one who had, in the moment of death, risen to the heights of human dignity. "Greater love hath no man than this...".

Of course, like everything else in life, these moments are shot through with futility, appalling waste, violence, greed and selfishness. Our noblest moments lie very close to our worst. We do not glamorise war by dwelling on deeds of valour – but neither must we fall prey to the cynicism which would dismiss them. Above all, we have a solemn duty to remember.

Remembrance Day this year is particularly poignant. Every bulletin and TV news programme reminds us that our troops are in Afghanistan. There is, however, a very significant difference between our present position and the one we were in during two great World Wars. Our Army is at war but the people are not. Our soldiers are fighting and being killed but the nation is not at war. Despite the constant reminders in our newspapers and on our television sets, the population as a whole is nowhere so intimately, personally, physically and emotionally committed as it was when Hitler's bombs were devastating our cities, and Winston Churchill called our people to sacrifices, privations, hardships and above all endurance in the bitter conflict which threatened our nation and the existence of the entire civilized world.

There is clearly an unwelcome implication in all this, and it has become increasingly evident that we have not been sufficiently alert to it. Our soldiers were beginning to feel that we were not particularly interested in them. Whilst facing the withering fire of the Taliban you don't want to be thinking of your family with a leaking roof, damp walls, broken gutters and poor heating. If you're badly wounded, seriously disabled or mentally traumatized, you shouldn't have to take pot luck in a mixed ward in the NHS. You don't want politicians or the media rubbishing what you are doing and openly speaking of it as a waste of time, money and precious lives.

That's the big difference between the nation being at war and not just the Army. Leaving the car park of the JR recently we were halted by police outriders. A few moments later two hearses, gently escorted, came towards us and we glimpsed two soldiers from Afghanistan lying beneath the national flag, under which they had fought and died. There are signs that we do care. The journey from Wootton Bassett to the JR has become a sacred journey. The nation is under covenant to care for our Armed Forces and today is not a bad day to remember that.

Fritz Beer, a Jewish, German speaking Czech refugee, was deported with his family, to a Nazi Concentration Camp. "I was sometimes tormented" he wrote "by the picture of my father on his way to the gas chamber." Surviving, he became a writer and broadcaster. Before he died, aged 95, he wrote that his experience ".....had reinforced his belief that remembering was the greatest of duties later generations owed to those who faced death so broken and humiliated. If we don't forget them, they live on in honour and in our love."

Recently my son surprised me by saying he'd read Richard Woodman's book "The Real Cruel Sea" and gave me a copy. It's the story of the Merchant Navy and the Battle of the Atlantic. Whenever I cross the Atlantic I think of the tens of thousands of Merchant seamen and the hundreds of thousands of tons of Merchant shipping lying on the floor of that cruel sea. Why should I have survived?

Some time ago I got from one of my grandchildren a copy of his report of a school visit to the Holocaust sites including Auschwitz. He went with 39 other 17-18 year old boys and 3 teachers. Let me quote from what he says :

"For me the trip became something of a spiritual journey. I learnt powerful lessons about myself and about the overwhelming selfishness of our culture".

"Auschwitz itself was where the history tour stopped and became a series of spiritual revelations with which God blessed me".

"At the end of the trip" he writes "I asked the teacher who had organised the trip why, having been there many times before, he still went back. His answer surprised me, partly because he summarised what God had taught me through the experience – to live for others. 'I don't do it for myself' the teacher said, 'I do it for you'."

I am glad my grandson has a teacher who has learnt the importance of remembering and telling the story. A generation that has forgotten how to remember is in grave danger. We can only pray that such a generation will never have to be reminded by going through the same experience again.

It is vital to our understanding of Remembrance, that whether or not we were there and have memories of our own is irrelevant. Telling the story to our children and grandchildren with as much truth and integrity as we can is what matters.

Do you tend to avoid historical documentaries? Would you go into a bookshop and buy the recently published history of Auschwitz?

Don't avoid them, watch the footage, read the history, now so well written and balanced. How can we tell the next generation if we avoid the history ourselves?

Fritz Beer said "If we don't forget them, they live on in honour and in our love". But what happens if we DO forget them? We dishonour them, poison our corporate life and impoverish future generations by the selfish and flippant neglect of our history.

Recently we buried the last living soldier who fought on the Somme in World War I. Every day one reads obituaries of those who came through World War II. If Remembrance Day is not to dribble away when we have all gone, we must learn as a nation and people how to remember.

As Jesus went to His Cross He said "I don't do this for myself. I do it for you." When we share with Him the bread and wine, He says, "Do this in Remembrance of Me". The only way to make sure we remember is to keep telling the story.

Which is what we do in every Eucharist.