

War and Peace

An address given by Father Michael Harper in St Catherine's College Chapel, Cambridge, on November 14th 2004

This Sunday, Remembrance Sunday, we traditionally recall those who died or suffered injuries in recent wars. In a sense, every Sunday is a Remembrance Sunday for Christians, for Christ said to his disciples at the Last Supper – “this do in remembrance of me”. Also, remembrance plays a pivotal part in all our yesterdays – those connected directly with our Christian Faith, birthdays, wedding anniversaries and other such celebrations, and more immediately at this time to remember those connected with the wars of the last century.

Only those who have taken part in war can possibly understand the horror of it. My father, who served in Flanders in the Great War, like so many others, never spoke about his experiences. Some years ago, when I visited the Christian Community of Lee Abbey in North Devon, I met a delightful man who served on the estate. He had been a soldier in the 2nd World War, and landed in Normandy on D-Day. Friends of his invited him to a D-Day reunion. Shortly after returning to Lee Abbey he committed suicide, and it was thought that the reason why he did was the revival of the hideous memories of the war, which came to him at the reunion.

We should be grateful that Poppy Day still holds such an important place in our society – if anything increasingly so. We can express in a variety of ways our gratitude to those who gave their lives in the wars, and others who have had to live many years with crippling disabilities because of injuries sustained in such wars. It also gives us an opportunity to remember the families of those serving in Iraq, especially those who have suffered the loss of loved ones.

At the end of the First World War, the then Dean of Westminster Abbey conceived the idea of bringing the body of an unknown soldier from Flanders and burying him in the Abbey. A recent Dean, Michael Mayne, has written about the many heads of state, who in his day laid wreaths at the foot of the grave. “It is the grave of a nameless, classless, ageless man, who has become more famed than all the great and the good who lie around him, and who has come to represent the much wider constituency of those who have died in the wars of the last century.”

Less well known, and complementing rather than competing with it, is the stone that marks the Memorial to Innocent Victims, which stands close to the grave of the unknown warrior. On the circumference of the stone are inscribed the words, “is it nothing to you all, you who pass by” and in the centre are the words “all innocent victims of oppression, violence and war”. As we remember those in the armed forces who died in the wars of the last century, we need also to remember the civilians who died or were injured as a direct result of war, now euphemistically called “collateral damage”, as well as the many victims of human genocide.

It has been reckoned that at the beginning of the 20th century civilian casualties numbered about 20% of all those killed or injured in war. By the end of the 2nd World War the figure had risen to 60%, and by the end of the century to 80%. If the figures are correct – and some do challenge them, then the figure in the current Iraq War will have risen to nearly 99%

The Queen was present when the Memorial to Innocent Victims was consecrated. Also present, standing in a semi-circle around the Memorial, were:

Celestin, a man who lost 23 relatives but who himself survived the genocide in Rwanda, which took the lives of 800,000 people:

Eldin, who lost his sight and both hands during the Bosnian war

Daw Nita, who spent many years in prison in Burma

Lella, a Christian from Jerusalem, representing the Palestinian refugees.

Two women from Northern Ireland, a Catholic and a Protestant. Maura, whose son was shot dead as he left Mass, and Joan, whose daughter was killed when the bomb exploded at the Remembrance Day service at Enniskillen

Irina, a poet, who was sent to a Siberian labour camp

Yervant, who survived the massacre by the Turks of one and half million Armenians in the Great War

Fiona, a teacher at Dunblane School who witnessed the killing of a number of her pupils.

Anita, who survived both Belsen and Auschwitz because she was a violinist and could play Brahms and Schubert to the camp commandants.

The late Hugh Gryn, who was a Jewish Rabbi, was interned in Auschwitz as a young boy with his father, who died there. He was once asked “where was God in Auschwitz?” He replied, “God was there himself, violated and blasphemed. But the real question is ‘where was man in Auschwitz?’” If we could find the answer to that question, the world would be a much better and safer place.

1 Jesus Christ – the wounded healer

Yes, God was in Auschwitz. And we can see this in a deeply moving way when we look again at the occasion when Christ first appeared to his followers after his resurrection – his first words were “peace be with you all”. He then showed them his hands and his side, his wounds. Why did He do that? Clearly to reveal to them his credentials – that He was not a bogus phantom, but the same person who had so recently died on the Cross. But was that all? We need to go deeper to see the full significance of this gesture. These wounds were his credentials to a suffering world. They showed that God cares and shares our sufferings; his wounds are our wounds, and our wounds are his; God always has a place for our pain and sufferings, whether on the battlefield or anywhere else. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it perfectly when he wrote about Christ, “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested and tempted as we are, yet without sinning.” (Heb.4:15)

The Ecumenical Patriarch spoke about this in a recent address to the European Assembly and described Christ as “the wounded healer”. He quoted St Gregory of Nyssa who affirmed that the greatness and glory of God are to be seen, not in any act of overwhelming power such as the creation of the universe or the stilling of the storm on the lake, but rather in the *kenosis* – his self-emptying, whereby He has chosen to share in our fragility and brokenness, becoming obedient to death, even death upon the Cross. His total sharing in our humiliation, is the true summit of his divine omnipotence. God is never so strong as when He is most weak. St Paul discovered this secret in his own experience, and testified to it when

he wrote the words, “when I am weak, then am I strong”. He spoke too of God’s power as being “made perfect in weakness”.

There are no easy answers to those who have suffered in the two World Wars, as well as those who have endured the atrocities of the Holocaust, and more recently the horrors of the school in Belsan, and the cities of Iraq. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his last days in prison in Germany shortly before his execution wrote, “only a suffering God can help”. And help He does. Our part is to remember, to pray, to support and to sympathise.

The sheer numbers can so often lack meaning. A suggestion might be for each of us to take one family who has lost a member through the wars of the past or the current conflict in Iraq – either known to us personally, or perhaps one we have read about in the newspapers, and then to make that family a focus of our prayers.

2 - Jesus Christ – the man of peace

In the reading of the Old Testament we heard of the contrast between King David, the man of war, and Solomon, the man of peace. The words to David were “a son shall be born to you, he shall be a man of peace”. David could not build the Temple in Jerusalem because he had fought so many battles. One of the tragedies of the life of the late Yasser Arafat was that he never seemed to be able altogether to shake off the image he had projected of being a fighter, rather than a healer and reconciler. Maybe now a Solomon can take over and deliver the peace so many long for.

But Christ, though He was the Son of David, was essentially the Prince of Peace. The peace He declared to the Church on that first Easter evening, was not just words, He was peace incarnate, the God of peace and not of war. When He spoke with his followers just before His arrest, He declared “peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives.” The world offers wars and rumours of wars. According to a Norwegian survey in 1960 there had been up to then some 14,000 wars covering a 5000 year period. But Christ brings peace. St Paul writes about Christ, “He is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility”.

3 Jesus Christ – who blesses peacemakers

The Christ, who is our peace and reconciler, calls us to the ministry of peace and reconciliation. Christ is peace personified, so his people will be

peacemakers, which is exactly what He said in the Sermon of the Mount, “blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” In the Orthodox hymn or Kontakion sung on Good Friday, the prayer is made that God may give “weapons of peace and a standard of victory”.

Many years ago the Churches in Papua New Guinea agreed to do a march right across the island – carrying a wooden cross. Half way across they encountered a tribal war going on with bloodshed on both sides. When the cross arrived they laid down their arms and machetes and carried the cross to the other side of their tribal area. Once the cross had left they picked up their arms and continued their tribal war. That is how NOT to do it!

It is reported that Eisenhower, when he was President of the United States once said, “I think that people want peace so much that one of these days governments had better get out of the way, and let them have it”.

John Donne once wrote, “no man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.. 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”.

Rita Laser’s brother was in the twin towers on September 9//11, and died with 3000 others. She wrote about it, echoing the words of John Donne, “my brother is dead, but I am not looking to atone for his death. I’m looking to prevent the deaths of others. The world is larger than just me.”

The Greek word for peace in the New Testament is *eirene*. The essence of its meaning is “to join or bind people together.” It is a relationship word. It is also a word which is to be understood as having a positive quality. Paul lists it amongst the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is not primarily about the absence of noise, anger, or resentment. I remember I used to smile when we sang the hymn “peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away”. But true peace is not a matter of distancing ourselves from one another, but of uniting ourselves in a common bond of love and respect. It is the art of binding people together – even opposites, yes, even enemies. It is a ministry in short supply today, but desperately needed in the Middle East, Kosovo, Iraq, the Sudan and many other places.

There is always a danger that some see war as the solution to all problems. Abraham Maslow has said, “if the only tool you have is a hammer, you will see every problem as a nail”. We need to reject the war

mentality. It has been well put in a UNESCO statement, “the same species who invented war is capable of inventing peace. The responsibility lies with each one of us.”

In 1990 I took part in an Ecumenical Conference in Bern in Switzerland. Part of the programme was a march through the city centre, and we were invited to carry with us our national flags. A problem immediately arose because there were both Israeli and Palestinian Christians at the Conference, and the Israelis objected to the Palestinians carrying their national flag, and threatened to boycott the march if they did. The Swiss chairman of the Conference came up with a wise solution. Both groups were to march together under a banner with the words written in both Hebrew and Arabic, “pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” Now that Yasser Arafat is dead, we need to pray as never before for that peace.

I would like to end with a prayer for peace:

Christ of wounds, Christ of tears, Christ
of the wounds of the piercing, hold us in
your hands, scarred with love, through all
our trials and sufferings, and by your wounds,
may we find healing

Circle, O God, those who work for peace,
encircle them with your presence
keep wisdom within, keep folly out
keep strength within, keep weariness out
keep hope within, keep despair out
keep light within, keep darkness out
in the name of the Sacred Three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Circle, O God, the victims of violence and injustice
Encircle them with your presence
Keep truth within, keep falsehood out
Keep compassion within, keep hardheartedness out
Keep love within, keep hatred out
In the name of the sacred Three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Amen