

Remembrance Sunday 2013

I've had a worrying sort of week. I'm always rather anxious about writing the Remembrance day sermon. I think it is partly because it seems impudent to comment on the deepest memories of a country that is only half my own, and partly because the day needs honoring **and** we need challenging – there is no greater calling than to live for peace. All the best military people I know live by this -they do their job that there might be peace not war.

My dilemma was made considerably worse by stumbling across a quote from one of my favourite Christian writers Robert Farrar Capon.

It went like this:

“Good preachers should be like bad kids. They ought to be naughty enough to tiptoe up on dozing congregations, steal their bottles of religion pills...and flush them all down the drain.”

So you see, even on Civic occasions such as these I can't resort to Religious platitudes.

Next year it will be 100 years -100 years ago that the Great War was firing up as a serious conflict. It was not all over by Christmas, no one backed down, and the fight to the death was on. As AJP Taylor remarked, defence was mechanised, while attack was not. Row after row of boys from both sides were mown down by entrenched machine guns.

Tens of thousands were killed in the first year. What had started out in a wave of patriotic fervour was exposed as a catastrophic blunder by both sides. Shocked civilian authorities could not understand why the enemy should be so determined. In the German trenches, the soldiers hung up a sign to taunt the Tommies, 'God is with us.' In German "Gott mit uns!" With characteristic wit the Tommies held up a sign next day that read, "We got mittens too!"

God is with us, said the Germans. God is with us, said the British.

God is with us? Oh yes. But with us in the blood and the pain, not in the cruelty and the triumph.

Almost 70 years ago, in November 1945, the Allies were victorious. On that first Remembrance Sunday, Europe and Japan lay in ruins, the Americans had terminated our lifeline of Lend-lease, and we were in big trouble financially. Times had changed at home, Churchill was out and Attlee in. Huge challenges lay ahead in the reconstruction of the nation. The avowed Socialist Government had radical ideas, a National Health Service no less, with medical treatment for all free at the point of need. The medical establishment was outraged; this was against everything they stood for, yet the Government saw the proposed NHS as the people's right. Battle lines were drawn and the debate began.

Seventy years later wars have not stopped, after the fiasco in Iraq we are not yet out of Afghanistan. 446 people have been killed -and they have given their lives to control the growth of anti-western terrorism and they are not lost in vain. Many will argue that we are protecting our freedom -the terrorists will overwhelm us. But -Freedom comes at a price - especially for local Afghans - we don't even count their casualties. Others will argue that if we had only taken such resolute action back in the 1930s Hitler might well have thought twice about lashing out in Europe.

If only it were that simple. If only there were actually goodies and baddies.

Let me remind you of a certain Curtis LeMay. Born in Columbus, Ohio in 1905 he became the country's finest navigator -at very young age. He was sent to Europe in 1942 and he worked out that the traditional way of flying in a zig-zag pattern to avoid enemy fire actually increased your chances of getting shot -flying straight was much faster and you therefore spent less time exposed to enemy fire. He devised a new formation -flew at the head of the first mission -not a single plane went down -and the tactics for strategic bombing were transformed.

Aged 36 LeMay became the youngest general in the army and was transferred to Japan in 1944. His thought process was simple. He planned a devastating schedule of firebombing. A mix of bombs - magnesium for high temperatures, napalm for splatter -choosing a bomb pattern that could start a firestorm. He hoped that the firebombing would break the will of the Japanese people.

If you want a quote to keep you awake at night -here goes - LeMay's philosophy of war:

‘I’ll tell you what war is about. You’ve got to kill people and when you kill enough of them, they stop fighting.’

That is indeed what happen -the nuclear option.

We’ve just been standing outside remembering young people -those who fought in the two world wars and those who have been lost in subsequent wars. They fought for simple and noble aims. For their families, for the country they loved, for future generations, for freedom. In their lives we see some of the heights the human spirit can achieve – courage and altruism -extraordinary examples that we want to show the next generation -

When we remember these people we can rightly be proud. Proud of their courage but still horrified by what war can do. The extreme pain and suffering that war causes, and also the utter corruption of the human spirit. -‘I’ll tell you what war is about. You’ve got to kill people and when you kill enough of them, they stop fighting.’ How do you become a man who can think and say such things?

So every Remembrance day is a challenge. The best and the worst of humanity. And -in the midst of it Jesus hanging on the cross calling for forgiveness for those who were killing him.

If you want to make this personal then this is the day when you really need to think -what petty hurts are you holding on to -what is worth allowing relationships to be broken for? Is there really such a difference between the little wars fought within families, communities, churches even, and those that tear apart whole countries. War starts in the heart. Tony Blair’s heart was set on war and he found the ‘evidence’ (flawed as we now know) to support his position.

As our hearts rightly bleed today for all those lost over the past century defending our country and keeping us free -let us also have to courage to look at the war that is within us and respond to the simple Christian message of peace and forgiveness. We honour them best when we live in peace.