

## **JUST WAR? A REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY ADDRESS ABOARD H M FRIGATE UNICORN DUNDEE 8 November 2015**

About this time in November 1915 it must have dawned on the military serving in France and Belgium that the Great War was not going to be a glorious affair. As the miles of muddy trenches multiplied so did the realisation of a growing stalemate and the senseless waste of lives given going 'over the top' for the sake of gaining the mere length of a football pitch. The iconic wartime poster – 'Your country needs you' with Lord Kitchener pointing a stern finger was to be seen everywhere in Britain, appealing to patriotism and service. However as graphic reports of the terrible realities of war reached these shores the enthusiasm for volunteering dwindled and by 1916 conscription was required to keep up with the slaughter.

The Great War was an industrialised war with deadlier machines and newly invented methods of mutual destruction, epitomised by tanks and machine guns, aeroplanes and zeppelins, huge battleships and sinister submarines, mustard gas and shell shock – the post-traumatic stress syndrome of its day. Women also went to war, caring on the battlefield for the injured and dying, for broken bodies and minds. And putting in long shifts in munitions factories with all the attendant dangers. It was meant to be a war 'to end all wars.' Sadly this hope was not to be and 16 million people died. Back in the 1970s as a young curate here in Dundee I recall visiting aged First World War widows, sepia photos of uniformed sweethearts proudly surmounting their tenement mantelpieces.

During the First World War, Naval Chaplains served with distinction from the outset. Chaplain Ellis described his narrow escape when the cruiser Hogue was torpedoed: "We were struck twice ... I went down with the ship ... I wondered that I was not afraid of drowning ... though there was little chance of being saved ... I came up breathless with a spar under my arm ... my prayer-book remained in my pocket ... the survivors sang hymns and songs until we were picked up by a Dutch trading vessel." [Taylor p.337] Chaplain Ellis came face to face with the reality of Jesus words: 'blessed are those who know their need of God.'

Chaplains learned to penetrate the hearts of hardened seafarers. Writing in 1915 Admiral Sir Lewis Ritchie noted how the Padre's sermon, "spoke very

simply, his delivery aimed at the least intelligent of his hearers, no fierce denunciation or sudden gestures or change of tone ... he touched on matters not commonly spoken of in pulpits ... his temperate discourse passed beyond creed or dogma, and a tattooed fist suddenly clenched on its owners hat brim, or the restless shifting of a foot, told where a shaft passed home." [Taylor p.336]

Recovering from his battlefield experiences in an Edinburgh hospital in 1917, the shell-shocked soldier-poet Wilfred Owen composed a poem about the lost generation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century entitled 'Anthem for doomed youth.' He wrote, "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle? Only the monstrous anger of the guns; in their eyes shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes."

Experiences like this lead both politicians and parents of young service personnel to ask, are wars ever justified? When is military intervention the right or wrong thing to do? And how can it be claimed that God takes one side or another, isn't religion the cause of all the major wars of history? The rise of militant Islamic State and the frightening reach of global terrorism in the name of Holy War certainly accentuate this impression.

A warrior ethos and violence lie deep in our humanity but so do unmeasurable loving forgiveness. Religion can be used as a scapegoat for unashamed abuses of power – aggressive nationalism, acquisitive colonialism and the intolerance of minorities. The Holocaust was a defining tragedy, yet ethnic cleansing, factional aggression and the forced displacement of millions of civilians seem to be on the increase. People of faith have both gone along with these bad things and vigorously opposed them, often at great cost – just as wider society does.

We are still struggling with the same question raised by the prophet Isaiah: why do nations rise against each other, why can't swords be beaten into ploughshares?

Just war theories argue that the use of force can bring about a better good. So we might aid persecuted minorities and countries being invaded, we can protect our borders and our citizens abroad. Our force should be proportionate, and as we learned in Iraq, we need to consider outcomes, unforeseen consequences and an exit strategy. Paradoxically during World War 2 my late father served with the RAF in northern Iraq where once again so much unhappiness has been perpetrated on communities and minorities:

Christian and Muslim, Kurdish and Yassidi. Syrian refugees in their thousands are trekking the dangerous journey to the gates of Europe, pressing upon us the urgent question: so just who is my neighbour?

Compassion surely lies at the centre of religious and secular morality. Jesus challenged people to love their enemies, while the Golden Rule - do as you would be done by - is a thread running through the lives of those of many faiths and none. Children are perceptive and soon learn personal responsibility to confront the bully, to act well, in the playground and into adult life.

During the Great War conscription produced conscientious objectors. Britain considered itself a Christian nation but much of the nation did not recognise a Christianity that precluded warfare. 'Conchies' were assigned to non-combatant duties, some faced imprisonment, even execution. Many were sent white feathers, alleging cowardice. Nowadays we are more even-handed about pacifism.

As a young student I recall wondering just how long Remembrance Sunday would be observed and whether it might dwindle away as World War veterans grew older and died. I was of course naïve and very wrong as it turns out. It seems our sensitivity to conflict and its consequences is heightened and our respect for those who serve is undiminished, while the valued role of Forces Chaplains continues to impress.

Support for the British Legion and Help for Heroes reaches new generations wearing poppies with pride. Each year Poppy Scotland raises over £2 million, providing much needed financial support to ex-servicemen and women as well as funding specialist support – medical and social care, housing and employment. We wear our poppy with pride, remembering lest we forget.

So, once again here on the Frigate Unicorn, let us honour the sacrifices of those who have served in the Armed Forces down the years, especially those who go down to the sea in ships, all those we love but see no longer, and those 'Known unto God', a phrase coined from Rudyard Kipling and inscribed on unnamed war graves. Our prayer is to rekindle our determination to work for the freedom, justice and peace of the commonwealth of humanity in our day.

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