

The Address given by Fr Christopher Wilson at the War Memorial, Euston Place, on Sunday 13 November 2016 (Remembrance Sunday).

Remembrance Sunday 2016

(This address followed a reading of Romans 12.1-2,9-18.)

***'These were his servants, in his steps they trod,
Following through death the martyred Son of God;
Victor he rose; victorious too shall rise
They who have drunk his cup of sacrifice.'***

Words of Sir John Stanhope Arkwright, from his poem 'O valiant hearts', part of which we'll sing in a few minutes' time. It comes from his collection of 'poems in time of war', published in 1919.

Arkwright's poem reflects a theme current at the time. How could the slaughter in the Flanders trenches and No Man's Land be understood, and reconciled with ordinary hopes and longings for humanity? How could the notion of human progress through science and education be held together with the reality of such a terrible war? How could dignity and nobility survive in the face of such terrible suffering?

Another poet, Wilfred Owen, summed up the futility and senselessness of it all, time and again, in lines such as these:

***'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.'***

But Arkwright caught on to a bigger vision: a vision which was to resonate with an entire generation of sorrowing and bereaved people, whose youth had come to grief among the poppy fields. Notions of slaughter were put to one side. The Great War was about sacrifice in the cause of right. Those who had given their lives - who of course came largely from a Christian background - would one day rise victorious from their graves with Jesus.

Here was accomplishment; here was hope. Unsought martyrdom was a messy and sordid event, but it brought both deliverance for the country and glory to the dead. They were with God, and were advancing the work of God in the great battle between good and evil.

A generation later, in the face once again of great suffering - much of it by civilians, and especially by those incarcerated in concentration camps - the vision moved on. It wasn't so much about valiant fighters being raised up to share in the work of God, although that was present for some. It was about God stooping low to share in the sufferings of helpless people, military and civilian alike.

***'Behind me, I heard the same man asking:
"For God's sake, where is God?"
And from within me, I heard a voice answer:
"Where is He? This is where: hanging here from this gallows...'***

Words of the Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel.

Elie Wiesel glimpsed God alongside us in our suffering. Perhaps that led him to realise that God is present in our world, not as some tyrant puppet-master, but wherever hearts and lives are spent in the pursuit of goodness. Wiesel spent the rest of his life working for goodness, gratitude, truth, integrity, generosity; urging whoever would listen not to remain on the sidelines, not to remain neutral, but to stand up for what is right.

That's what so many men and women did to the best of their ability in the conflicts we remember today, thank God. And that's what we must all continue to do if we are to have a hope for lasting peace, reconciliation and justice. God gives us the freewill and the responsibility to make the best of this world; God lives among us as we get on with the job. That's a vision worth holding: worth living for, and yes, worth dying for.

Wiesel cuts across the complacency which is happy to leave the work to others. 'The opposite of love is not hate', he wrote; 'it's indifference.' Or to put it another way: for evil to prosper, it's necessary only for good people to do nothing.

The vision we need to regain today is the vision of engagement for good with the whole of creation. Engagement for reconciliation, peace and unity across the fault-lines of our society and our world. Even as we remember and give thanks for all those who so selflessly gave their lives for our freedom, we must do all that lies in our power to build a world that's genuinely better for all people. Our freedom, hope and prosperity are all of a piece with the freedom, hope and prosperity of those who share this planet with us. Or as the poet Hafiz of Persia put it:

***'I have come into this world to see this:
the sword drop from men's hands
even at the height of their arc of rage,
because we have finally realized
there is just one flesh we can wound.'***

The greatest tribute we can make to those we remember today is in the quality of our lives; in our attitudes, words and actions. 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God', wrote St Paul. He continued with that down-to-earth, straightforward, challenging guidance I read a few minutes ago:

'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers...'

And maybe, just maybe, if we all picked one phrase out of that and worked on it, it would take remembrance forward from a word and a feeling to a concrete and fruitful reality.