

Remembrance Day Service Puy de Serre 2017

Reading from young person

I first visited France at Easter 1961, courtesy of the Yorkshire Lille exchange set up after the war by a man who, like Brother Roger who founded the Taize Community of Reconciliation, believed that if people of different nationalities came to understand and make friends with each other, war would be less likely to reoccur.

So I arrived, aged 15, in Armentiers – where the celebrates Mademoiselle came from – to learn that French was a living language, rather than the intellectual exercise, rather like playing chess or doing a crossword, spoken by people just like me.

My pen friend's family took me just across the nearby border to Ypres where I visited a museum dedicated to the 1st World War. My first vivid memory of Remembrance Day comes from that visit. I'd always bought a poppy and worn it - because, well that was what you did - but as I stood in the museum next to a shell which towered above me, I suddenly felt something of the horror which soldiers, unable to move in their trenches, must have felt as such things rained down upon them. That first memory was quickly followed by visits to military cemeteries, immaculately kept, where lie thousands of war dead, many of them known only to God. The scale of casualties, particularly in the first World War, defies my capacity to take it in. 57000 British soldiers killed or missing on the first day of the battle of the Somme – more than the combined armies which faced each other at Agincourt. More British casualties in the first ten minutes, cut down by machine gun fire, than during the entire battle of Waterloo. Young men from all walks of life, plucked from their peaceful existence to be wiped out, some in an instant, some dying slowly and painfully alone, others swallowed in the mud of Flanders fields, all united in their death, their sacrifice.

In the village of Golcar where I was privileged to be vicar and chaplain to the Royal British Legion for 23 years 146 men were killed in the First World War and 52 in the second. On Remembrance Day we would read out their names, just before the 2 minutes silence at 11am. 8 Taylors between 1914-18,

followed by 2 more between 1939-45. Such is the price of war and it is good that we are here to remember.

2 years ago I took part in a service at the cemetery in **Kanchanaburi** near the infamous bridge over the River Kwai. Three survivors from the prison camp were there, now in their 90s. One showed us the ditch he and his fellow prisoners had been forced to dig by their Japanese captors who told them it was to be their grave. They were to be shot the following day. Fortunately for them, but not for the thousands of Japanese civilians who died in its blast, the Hiroshima bomb, dropped by the Americans that very day, ended the war and they were spared.

The death of those Japanese reminds us that **War** does not discriminate between its victims, increasingly so, as modern weapons of mass destruction proliferate and battle fields grow ever bigger , or, as in our recent times, terrorists seek only to claim as many victims as possible, to spread fear and promote feelings that, in spite of every government's efforts to frustrate their activities, no one can ever be safe.

In many cases, though certainly not all, warring nations claim that they act in the name of God. The Allies in both world wars believed in the justice of their cause and God's presence with them as they fought, but so did many of their German opponents whose uniform belts proclaimed Gott mit uns.

The Israelites celebrated God, not only being on their side, but intervening miraculously on their behalf in numerous battles, but came to lament that He no longer went out with their armies.

Remembrance Day compels us to look war in the face. In spite of its glamour, appeals to nationalism or even justice, the costs of war are horrific. Throughout history millions have died or been killed and as we meet today numerous conflicts continue throughout the world, whilst we hold our breath at the growing tension between the leaders of North Korea and the USA.

Where is God to be found in all this? Christians are divided, mostly obviously between the many who fought and were willing to die, seeing

that a just war was the lesser of two evils and those who see pacifism as the only Christian option available to them. In my own family my father refused to kill by fighting but risked his life daily as a member of the Bomb disposal unit. Of my two uncles one for the same reasons as my father was involved in Air Sea Rescue, 'saving people from drowning first and only then asking whose side they were on', as he liked to say. The other commanded a motor torpedo boat and was involved in fighting and killing. Each one did what they believed to be right.

For me the best answer to the question came from an Army Chaplain who had served in Northern Ireland. After the huge bomb explosion at Warren Point one of the soldiers asked him, in the anger of grief, 'Where was your God, when my mate was blown to pieces? He replied, 'where He always is, in the back of the lorry sitting next to him.'

We believe in a God who became incarnate, sharing our humanity, with all its challenges, except the sin which leads us to look down on those who are different from us. He shared our suffering and took the weight of the sin of the world upon Himself when He dies upon the cross and prayed for forgiveness for those who nailed Him there. By rising from the dead He destroyed the power of evil and death.

It is often said that we are waiting for the fullness of Christ's victory which we will only know when He returns. Certain Christian writers have likened the cross to D Day and Christ's return to VE day, but such thinking is limited theologically speaking, as it invites the thought that, as was the case on D Day, Christ's victory was incomplete. Clearly this was not the case but as we see the continuation of war and its effects it is understandable that we should ask, 'How long, Oh Lord and pray with renewed fervour for His kingdom to come.'

Perhaps the last word might be given to another survivor from the River Kwai. He still sings in his local church choir and, at one point, detached himself from the main group to stand at the grave of his particular friend, taken from him by cholera so many years ago. Quietly he sang a solo – though I believe that it was echoed by angels and archangels and all the hosts of heaven – from memory. It was Abide with me.

