

Benefice of Camelot Parishes

Talk by Rev Tristram Rae Smith at Bratton Seymour. North Cadbury, South Cadbury on Sunday 11th November 2018, Remembrance Sunday

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

John 15:9-17

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.
¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.
¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.
¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.
¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you.
¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.
¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.
¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The ironies of ending the war

2018, a special remembrance service, this day, of course, marks 100 years exactly since the Armistice on 11th November 2018 at 11 am which ended the First World War.

The end of the war brought with it its own ironies.

Mons- German machine gunner fired off last round then at 11 am exactly got out of trench, took off helmet, bowed to British lines and disappeared.

Meanwhile British counterpart said to subordinate, you can call men out for breakfast, the war is over.

And then on a more tragic note there were those who almost made it to the end of the war but died in the very last hours of fighting.

Armistice actually signed at 5 am, 11th November, what if ceasefire had been immediate ? Estimated 11,000 soldiers killed or wounded in last 6 hours of fighting.

One of those, the very last British soldier to die in war was Private George Ellison killed at 9.30 am, 11th November 1918.

How do we make sense of a death like that ? Why did he die ? His loss affected his family for the rest of their lives. In just 90 minutes the war would be over.

Listen to the voices

There are no now no living witnesses who fought in WW1, a few still alive who grew up as civilian children in that time. In that sense no longer living history but on other hand we have the memories and records that have been made before these witnesses died and which have now been passed on to us.

Lest we forget the message on the posters, if we are not to forget then we need to listen with humility to the voices of these witnesses coming to us across time and seek to understand what happened. There are of course a whole range of these voices available to us.

Early on, the political and military leaders had chance to publish their diaries and memoirs. And historians will no doubt continue to debate WW1 with so many 'What ifs ?'

And then there are the poets. Often we turn to them for a different perspective. The voice of the poets tended to change in course of war, early idealism and romanticism gave way to a more sombre and questioning tone. Have heard Binyon's poem written in early months of war, but perhaps best remembered poet of WW1 is Wilfred Owen, who died a week before the war ended. In his poem *Insensibility* he explores the way that war can blunt the capacity of soldiers for feeling and imagination and how this can even be a blessing. But then he contrasts the position of soldiers with those who are not directly involved in the fighting. To them there is another message and call, they are not to be immune to pity but to share what he describes as the 'eternal reciprocity of tears.'

And then there are the ordinary servicemen and women who had no real influence on decisions made but were simply caught up in the conflict. What of their voices ? The voices of people like those whose names we have read out this morning ?

Harry's story

There can of course be no one representative voice. The stories of each of them certainly have some common elements but they are also all unique.

As I have said, there are now no survivors of those who fought in WW1. But the last survivor lived just up the road in Wells. Harry Patch who died at the age of 111. And

he did eventually leave behind a very detailed record of his memories and thoughts. Perhaps we can take time to listen to his voice in particular this morning.

Harry of course did not seek the role of the last surviving witness. He did not want attention or the state funeral that some people suggested for him. And if he had died earlier, unlikely that anyone would have listened to him. People did not necessarily want to listen and at that stage there were anyway many others who had served in WW1.

And Harry for his part did not want to talk about his experiences either. He concentrated on his work as a plumber and then his interests in retirement. Yet at age of 98, a nightmare brought back memories and convinced him of the need to talk. And by this stage other people did want to listen because soon no-one would be left who could talk about what it was like to fight in the trenches.

And when he began to talk, Harry certainly had a lot to say. Important to remember that Harry was a man of peace, his is the perspective of the conscript, someone who was forced to fight. Unlike the poets had nothing to be disillusioned about because no illusions, knew in advance from his brother who had already been wounded in the war that conditions in the trenches would be lousy, dirty and insanitary with rats as big as cats.

And war spared Harry none of its horrors. Some experiences were particularly difficult to confront. Towards the very end of his life he asked the question in conversation 'Have you ever had to handle a man who didn't have a head?' but then could say no more.

The place of faith

All of this taken on its own could just be very bleak and sombre. And indeed if we look at our gospel reading with its emphasis on the need to love one another, it can be very difficult to relate this to the horrors and reality of war.

Now it is important to say that Harry like so many others in his position said that his faith had been destroyed by war, later wanted to rejoin church and sang in church choir, but it did not bring with it renewed faith. We need to respect that. Having said that as I have reflected on Harry's story, I have been struck by how many connections there are with the gospel and the life of faith.

First of all, no one needed to tell Harry what the love of friends was like and what it meant to lay down one's life for one's friends. One of his abiding memories of the Battle of Passchaendale was the loss of his three friends, 'Those chaps are always with me', he said, they belonged to one another and always looked after each other.

And yet Jesus died not simply for His friends but also for His enemies, 'while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son' (Romans 5:10). What about the Christian call to love one's enemies? Well, Harry's life after 100 took him on a new pilgrimage.

In 2004 he visited Passchaendale again and the BBC asked whether he would meet oldest living German veteran, Charles. At first he did not want to, but he came round

to it. He realised that Charles was a conscript and a man of peace just like himself. On listening to Charles he commented that he did not feel sorry for Germans during war but did feel sorry for Charles when he listened to what he had to go through. He ended by shaking Charles' hand saying I have had 87 years to think about the war and all that happened and now it is time to offer the hand of friendship.

And Harry's Biblical upbringing informed some of his choices he made in battle.

Face to face with German soldier who was about to kill him, he had four seconds to make decision. He recalled Moses and Ten Commandments and prohibition on killing and being an expert marksman, shot the man above the knee and in ankle. Shots aimed not to kill but with the calculation that the stretcher bearers would pick the man up, pass him to prisoner of war camp and at end of war he could rejoin family, maybe married, maybe children.

But there were also times when he felt he had failed to live up to these Christian standards. Going through battlefield full of English and German wounded crying for help, running for his life himself, thought of himself not as Good Samaritan but as those who passed by the wounded without help.

And was death the end ? He watched a man die with the word 'Mother' on his lips. It was a cry of surprise and joy. He (Harry) didn't see her but she was there. This made him always made him remember that death is not the end. No doubt about it. He passed from this life into the next and I felt as if I was in God's presence.

Lest we forget

So what is it that we are to remember ?

Well, first of course, sacrifice, cost, loss, called in Wilfred Owen's words to share the eternal reciprocity of tears.

And with it our respect and prayers for those who serve today in the armed forces.

We need to listen to the voices and witnesses like those of Harry and many others.

For one thing, it helps us not to sanitise war- Silhouettes what about the guns ?

And never again, the cry at the end of the war. Words of British PM Lloyd George, 11th November 1918, 'At eleven o'clock this morning came to an end the cruellest and most terrible War that has ever scourged mankind. I hope we may say that thus, this fateful morning, came to an end all wars.' In 1919, 'we must make, if we can, an enduring peace.' 86 years later as Harry and Charles met at Passchaendale never again was a call as fresh as ever, never again should this happen to other young men.

And yet as we know from subsequent history though there have been some limited successes wars have not come to an end. Indeed as Christians we may say that the human yearning for peace can never be achieved by our own unaided efforts, we will always fall far short. For the Christian witness is that only Jesus Christ has made peace between ourselves and God and that only in Him can we find the foundation for true and lasting peace with others. And the Christian gospel also affirms Harry's perception that death is not the end. In the well known words of John's gospel, 'For

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' (John. 3:16)