

Sunday 8 November: Remembrance Sunday

Remembrance Sunday

Readings: Hebrews 9.24-end; Mark 1.14-20

One of the best moments in the South African Mystery Plays performed at The Garrick recently was when God came down from heaven. She was a young and beautiful, pregnant and very determined woman. As God in heaven, her colourful outer garments were taken off and as Jesus on earth she put on first a denim jacket and then a house coat. She rolled up her sleeves and clearly meant business. She took off a turban and started work, the long cloth becoming a fishing net, which she cast into imaginary water. It became so full of fish that she had to call others on the shore for help to pull it in. That's how, in the Isango Portobello Theatre Company's Chester Mystery Plays from Kaliesha, Jesus gathered his disciples to work, as in today's Gospel.

One of the things St Martin's has made a priority for many years, is to engage Christianity with the world of work. At the heart of this city, and with our own business, it is our duty to do so. Sometimes this comes in a very particular form. On Thursday we hosted the Day of Prayer for the Armed Forces. Because the Navy led the organisation this year they asked if they could use the Admiralty's parish church, and come to St Martin's. The day before, the statue of Air Chief Marshall Sir Keith Park had been unveiled on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. St Martin is the patron saint of soldiers. All three Services should have felt at home.

Given the pacifism of Jesus in the Gospels there is, or ought to be, a deep disjunction between faith and work for Christians in the Armed Forces. Yet from the time that Christianity was conscripted to help unify the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century there have been Christians in the military. In the Armed Forces people put themselves on the line for the common good, out of duty, and in service of humanity. The language of sacrifice is real and the personal cost is high, as has been very evident this week.

In the act of worship three youngsters spoke about their experience of living by the values of the Armed Services.

Courage and Discipline were exhibited by a self-effacing and slightly embarrassed Lance Corporal from the Royal Marine Reserve. Matt Croucher told about an incident when he was deployed in Afghanistan. In an open courtyard, a grenade landed at his feet and was going to kill or injure the group of soldiers he was with. He threw himself on it, back pack first, body armour side down. The noise as it exploded was deafening but the men he was with all survived, and so did he with just a bloody nose and headache. "It's a split second decision", he said. "You don't think about it. It's instinctive. You do it for your brothers." He was awarded the George Cross.

A young airman, Flight Lieutenant Rich Anderson spoke about Respect and Integrity. "Respect can take years to gain and can be lost in a second." I was reminded of the way he had spoken when an Admiral later used Nelson's Prayer from before the Battle of Trafalgar:

May the great God, whom I worship, grant to my country and for the benefit of Europe in general, a great and glorious victory: and may no misconduct, in anyone, tarnish it: and may humanity after victory be the predominant feature in the British Fleet....

Lance Corporal Sarah Komen, a young Black woman spoke about Commitment and Loyalty and about those values in service of her country and her family and two small children. Apparently she had wondered why she had been asked to speak because she was very ordinary but in that context, that was exactly the point.

The service included a reading of the operational diary of a Royal Navy Chaplain in Afghanistan, the Reverend Stuart Hallam. An account of regular pastoral visiting of troops on deployment led into a harrowing account of him ministering to two men blown up by a land mine. I don't often think of clergy as heroic but the way he cradled the head of the one who survived into the operating theatre, talked to him and prayed with him as the medical team did their best was moving to tears. He then had to go out to tell these young men's colleagues that they had died and minister to them. It was impressive.

Increasingly, the military have come to see themselves as 'peacekeepers'. An ordered society is necessary for the peacemakers to flourish. Yet whether and how peace is won through force is a daily political and military problem, and the strain is felt across our society.

At the front of the church on Thursday was the poppy wreath laid at the cenotaph last year by Harry Patch, who has since died, Britain's last 'Fighting Tommy' from the First World War. In old age Harry Patch had become something of a celebrity but his symbolic presence on Thursday raised the most difficult aspects of praying for the Armed Forces. Harry Patch disliked Remembrance Day. He said that the Act of Remembrance on 11 November was, "just show business." His personal Remembrance Day was the 22nd September, the day he lost his three best mates and his own war ended. He said that "...if any man tells you he went over the top and he wasn't scared, he's a damn liar."

Harry Patch told of the moment when he came face to face with a German soldier and remembered Moses descending from Mount Sinai with God's commandment, 'thou shalt not kill.' He shot the German in the shoulder, which made him drop his rifle. But he carried on running towards Patch, so he then shot him above the knee, and in the ankle. Harry Patch said, "I had about five seconds to make the decision. I brought him down, but I didn't kill him."

In November 2004, at the age of 106, the BBC arranged a meeting between Harry Patch and a 107-year-old German veteran of Paschendale, Charles Kuentz. Afterwards Patch said, "I was a bit doubtful before meeting a German soldier. Herr Kuentz is a very nice gentleman, however. He is all for a united Europe and peace – and so am I." Kuentz had brought along a tin of Alsatian biscuits and in return Patch gave him a bottle of Somerset cider, simple gestures of friendship at the end of their lives.

St Martin, of course, is patron saint of pacifists as well as soldiers. That sets the tone for this church, named after one of the patron saints of France, on the edge of the Square named after Britain's greatest naval victory over the French. In the First World War, Dick Sheppard as Vicar here, started The People's Service, just 30 minutes on Sunday afternoon and packed to the doors. A military brass band played and as well as praying for those fighting the War, the Vicar quite exceptionally prayed for those who by conscience were opposed to all war, not in a derogatory way but as having a proper Christian vocation.

Later, on 16th October 1934, Dick Sheppard sent a letter to the Press. He wrote as an individual and not as the representative of any organisation or Church and wanted to test opinion and to discover if it was true that the majority of "thoughtful men" in this country thought war a denial of Christianity and a crime against humanity. He asked men to send a

post card within the next fortnight pledging, “We renounce war and never again, directly or indirectly, will we support or sanction another.”

The post cards were to be sent to the home of two of his friends, Frank and Grace Crozier who waited in growing disbelief that no-one had responded to Dick's appeal. On the third day the village postmaster phoned to ask why he hadn't been warned about the postcards which were arriving by the sackful. Over 100,000 cards were received. All who sent in their pledge were invited to a meeting at the Albert Hall and H R L Sheppard's Peace Movement was born, quickly changing its name to The Peace Pledge Union and admitting women. Patricia Franks and her mother, Miriam McCormick were the first female members.

Dick Sheppard wrote:

“I believe the world's will to peace may yet be made effective; but this can only happen if we renounce war, not only formally, but absolutely and unconditionally. I believe that they would, if only one of the Great Powers had the faith and the courage to lead the way. I want Britain to be that Power, and I want her to show that she is in earnest by disarming completely.”

Sheppard had a tremendous ability to produce inspiring phrases: “Not peace at any price but love at all costs.” His power of oratory could run away with him. Vera Brittan said he entranced an audience in Manchester in 1936:

“Last night I had a dream. In it George Lansbury and I were playing tennis against Hitler and Musso. George had a game leg and I was asthmatic, but we won six-love, six-love.”

The Church historian Alan Wilkinson comments, “The audience may have been ‘entranced’, but to invite [them] to indulge in such a childish fantasy about the dictators was surely culpable!” (Dissent and Conform p.121). The Christian vocation to pacifism needed more discipline than that.

In the Second Century, another French saint, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, articulated a truth by which this church lives. He said that the absence of paradox is the mark of heresy. There is a deep paradox in the Christian vocation to be peacemakers in a world of conflict and violence. Dick Sheppard was right: we need to move from a world which spends so much of its effort and resource on what is said to be ‘defence’ and is so often experienced as ‘attack.’ Paradox is also the daily reality for Christians in the Armed Forces who see themselves as fighting ‘to win the peace.’ We can be deeply impressed by and grateful for the values by which our Armed Forces at best conduct themselves and to which Christians make a great contribution.

Christ calls us to join in the work of God and we are faced by ambiguity and paradox, just as the first disciples who were called to be fishermen and follow in the way of the cross believing it to be the way to life in all its fullness.

On Remembrance Day we remember all those caught up in armed conflict and hold before God those individuals who have been killed in War. We pray that by remembering the terrible cost of war we may find the courage and creative imagination for a better and peaceable way through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.