

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 3rd Sunday before Advent – Remembrance Sunday

8th November 2020

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Two years ago I was contacted by an organisation which was working to put a bouquet of silk flowers on the grave of every Czech serviceman who had lost their lives in the Second World War. They sent me the flowers and the name of a young flying officer who is buried in the war cemetery in Marseille. So one hot Sunday, after church, we set off to find the grave. Mazargues war cemetery is about six kilometres from the city centre and is part of a large cemetery enclosed by high walls. Once you thread your way through the grounds, you come to another wall with a small door, behind which is the section set apart for the war dead. Immaculately kept, it's more like a park, with rills of water, trees and shrubs – apart from the rows and rows of headstones, of men from many nationalities, who died on active service in two World Wars. It was quiet and peaceful in that walled garden, but so sad. I wandered up and down looking for the name I had been sent, and eventually found him, laid my wreath, and said a prayer for him.

Last year we visited Thailand, and took a trip out from Bangkok to Myanmar, to the site of the infamous Death Railway and the Bridge over the River Kwai. On the way we stopped at another war cemetery, equally immaculately kept, lush green grass and tropical flowers. And again, rows and rows of headstones of people from many nationalities, all young, all of whom died building the railway for the enemy they had travelled many miles to fight. There were over 7000 graves in that one park, one of four in that area. We wandered up and down, reading the names, units they had belonged to, and their ages. But what we didn't see were the graves of the local civilian population, who also died building that railway –four times as many civilians died as captured servicemen, men, women, and children.

A third cemetery, much smaller with just sixteen memorials, in a village in New Zealand, was just as poignant. Sixteen men left to fight in both World Wars, half a world away, and never came back. Along with their names were pictures of each one, with what they did and where they lived. They were mostly sheep farmers, gardeners, mechanics, and apple growers.

To visit a war cemetery is a sobering experience, one that brings a tear to the eye and a lump to the throat for someone like me who has been fortunate enough never to experience, at first hand, a war. For me, it brings thoughts of a waste of young lives, of wondering how they must have felt, of whether they went willingly to war, excited at the thought of glory and fighting for a cause, or if they went reluctantly, wrenched from their families and homes to fight a war they didn't really care about? And the horrors that the civilian populations suffered too – deaths and injuries, loss of homes and possessions, loss of loved ones, loss of freedom when your country is invaded and foreigners take over.

It makes you wonder why mankind never learns. Why have there been wars since the beginnings of our race? I was reading an article recently which said that homo sapiens waged war against the Neanderthal race, which shared 99.7% of their DNA, to the point of extinction. That was 400,000 years ago. War isn't a modern invention: we just have more lethal weapons now than sticks and stones and spears. Our oldest writings are filled with war stories – just look at the Old Testament. It's one battle after another. Humans seem to be hard-wired to fight one another, to kill for territory, food, water, gold. And left unchecked, to do dreadful things to one other and try to wipe each other out. We have only to remember Jamie's reflection last week about the young woman sent to the death camp. And wars continue to rage around the globe. We saw, only last week in Nice and this week in Vienna, deaths caused by ideology.

It's something that Jesus wrestled with too – his people thought he had come to lead them into battle, to fight against the Romans and set them free. His message of peace, of living lives caring for one another and looking after one another, didn't sit well with many. It doesn't today – and it's so easy to forget that violence begets violence. The opposite is true too – the chances are if you smile at someone, they will smile back. Do someone a good turn and they'll remember – and do you a good turn in return. But that's not really very glamorous is it? Not like wearing a uniform and having the power of life and death. I used to work with the armed services in Britain, and when youngsters were selected and did their thirteen weeks basic training, they loved the running around with guns and doing assault courses and

generally having a lot of fun. Then they would be streamed into their specialist corps and start learning their trade. At which point many dropped out because it was boring learning how to cook, or use a computer, or fix a truck. Real life was boring!

But real life is where we all are. In our reading today from Matthew, Jesus stresses that we need to be ready in this life, with all its mundaneness, for his return. We don't know when that will be, it could be in the next five minutes and if it is, are we ready to meet him? Really ready to look him in the face and account for what we have done with our lives? Could we prove to him that we have followed his commandments of loving God and one another? Have we, like the five wise virgins, thought about what we are doing and what we need to equip ourselves with, or are we more like the other five who tripped along, enjoying the ride and looking forward to the party but without thinking that we might actually need to pack enough oil for our lamps otherwise we'll get lost in the dark, or miss the moment altogether and get left behind? If Jesus came back to the world today, would he find one where people live harmoniously with one another, caring for the poor, the sick, the orphaned, the prisoners, the hungry? Or would he find that we are still muddling along, and making mistakes, still killing one another.

It's easy to forget the horrors of war and of violence. We in Europe have had decades of peace and I pray that that will continue, and for most of us, war is something we see on the TV. But our armed services haven't had that luxury – they have been deployed around the globe. Most of them are volunteers, not conscripts, and go willingly, look upon it as a career. But as we've seen in Afghanistan, in the Falklands, in so many places, they still give their lives.

Jesus himself said in John 15.30 "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." He followed through on that saying, laying his own life down for all of us. It would be poor recompense to waste our lives, so dearly bought by him, and by the countless others who have over the centuries given their lives to save others.

Today is marked as Remembrance Sunday, when we pause to remember those who gave their lives for our freedom and safety. It's hard during a pandemic to do this together, we can't gather for the laying of poppy wreaths at war memorials, and have civic ceremonies, when we are so restricted in our movements. The annual ceremony at Mazargues is not going ahead, but the laying of wreaths at the Cenotaph in London will do so, although without the public being present. We will

be able to watch on TV, and during this service, remember those who have died or been injured. We will all mark this solemn occasion in our own ways.

But the best memorial of all is to live our lives to the full. To enjoy and respect the freedoms we have now, of travel (in more normal times), of self-expression, of moaning about our governments, but most of all to love and care for one another, to spend our lives following as nearly as we can to Christ's example and his commands, thinking about what we can do for others, not ourselves, being generous to those who have less than us, to live simply that others may simply live. To be wise and think ahead, rather than run out of oil and get left behind and forgotten.

Amen.