

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Sermon

12th November 2023

Remembrance Sunday

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd James Johnston, Chaplain

Last summer, while I was visiting the south west of France, I was taken to a memorial to the Resistance. On the side of a hill, in quiet countryside, it consists of a small graveyard, beautifully kept, beside a set of farm buildings which in 1944 were home to a group of *maquisards*. On 7th July 1944, the *maquisards* were surprised by a battalion of German soldiers, vastly superior in number and weaponry. After the War, the decision was taken to leave the site as a memorial to the events of that day. 76 white memorial stones lie opposite a collection of charred vehicles, while inside the outbuildings are the remains of the morning on which they died – crockery, cutlery, personal belongings, a pair of spectacles. The scene is frozen in time, all around it a deep silence.

The memorial, known as the Maquis de Meilhan¹, is one of many in France, the best known of its type being the village of Oradour-sur-Glane in the Haute-Vienne, the scene of a massacre which took place a month before the events at Meilhan. Oradour has been left unchanged for succeeding generations to visit and to reflect.

¹ Maquis de Meilhan, Villefranche, Gers.

There are memorials too within the chaplaincy area - streets named after individuals, a *stèle* listing names beside a road, as well as the many war cemeteries large and small where the bodies of millions lie who fell on both sides of the conflict in two World Wars. Here in Marseille, after this service we will go to the other end of the city for our Act of Remembrance at the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Mazargues. There too we will keep silence. Ironically, perhaps, for one thing that is rarest in war is silence.

But the reality of war brings us up short, cutting the words from our chattering mouths. The horror of it, the waste of it, the tragedy. Who would have believed two years ago that we would be gathering again at a time when shells were falling on European soil, while the world looks on, apparently unable to prevent it? And when the guns fall silent, who can tell when they will start again? Yesterday, we marked the Armistice which in 1918 ended the so-called 'war to end all wars'. Yet it is now widely recognised that the Treaty of Versailles which ended that conflict contained the seeds of the next one twenty-one years later, dragging the world into its firestorm.

However remote we may feel from the decisions taken by governments, we need to remember that it is not some external agency that is at work when war breaks out, but a collection of decisions made by fallible human beings just like you and me. Looked at through the lens of history, war may look inevitable, but each person involved in the decisions had agency.

The seeds of war are sown when people start to believe that the 'other' is not like us. The language of 'othering' may begin in quite an ordinary way, with

observations about different habits or cultures. But it can harden into something challenging, aggressive, a cycle of antagonistic utterances that gathers speed until it spills over into action. Thoughts become words, words become deeds. We see it every day on the news. Across democracies, politicians sometimes appear to compete to appeal to the worst in human nature, not the best, giving voters permission not only to think the unthinkable but to say it and, having said it, to act upon it.

What would those who lie beneath the turf of the cemetery in Mazargues have to say if they heard the ugly language of 'othering' we hear now? If we stop to listen to those young men, we might hear these words, written in 1919 but inspired by other words written two and a half thousand years earlier: 'When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow we gave our today.'

Two and a half thousand years. Does nothing change? Peace is so fragile, and such very hard work. In his Beatitudes Jesus says 'Blessed are the peacemakers'. Blessed are the ones who go out and do it, not just talk about it. Making peace involves patience, openness, perseverance, having our prejudices and assumptions challenged and then transformed into a new understanding. It involves sacrifice, humility, faith, hope and love. And the constant reminder that it is human beings who make war, and it is human beings who can make peace. The Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana said that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. That is why, on this day, we pause in silence to remember those who gave their lives in two World Wars and other conflicts since, and to honour their sacrifice.

If I had to find a single Bible verse that sums up what that sort of sacrifice involves, I think it would be verse 13 of Chapter 15 of St John's Gospel: 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' Those who go into battle fundamentally do so to defend their country and not to kill the enemy. And in doing so, some lose their lives, sometimes to save their comrades, in acts of extraordinary selflessness and generosity. The fact that we in our generations enjoy a life of relative security, stability and peace is because in two World Wars, and other conflicts since, there have been people who laid down their lives to make our future possible. There is something profoundly Christ-like about that.

In return, our task as Christ's followers is to do all we can to become the ground in which the seeds of peace may grow. The day to day peace-making about which we all have choices each day. Learning to avoid the harmful language that is the soil in which the risk of conflict festers, pushing back on politicians who use the language of hatred of those who are different from us and saying no, not in my name. Remembering daily that the environment in which war breaks out is more ordinary than we think.

On 24th April 1993, a tiny medieval church in London called St Ethelburga's was almost destroyed by a terrorist bomb left in a lorry outside it. The decision was taken to rebuild the church and to open it as a centre for peace and reconciliation. On 7th July 2005, four terrorist bombs were detonated on London's public transport system during the morning rush hour, leaving 56 people dead and 700 injured. Two acts of violence in recent memory, as people went about their ordinary lives.

In the aftermath of the transport bombings, the leader of the St Ethelburga's community wrote a prayer. I will end by inviting us to pray it now, as we ask God to make us into the ground in which peace may grow, this Remembrance Sunday and every day:

God of life,
every act of violence in our world, between myself and another,
destroys a part of your creation.
Stir in my heart a renewed sense of reverence for all life.
Give me the vision to recognise your spirit
in every human being, however they behave towards me.
Make possible the impossible by cultivating in me
the fertile seed of healing love.
May I play my part in breaking the cycle of violence
by realizing that peace begins with me.

Professor Simon Keyes

Amen.