

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 3rd Sunday before Advent – 12th November 2023

Remembrance Sunday

Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

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The last time I preached on Remembrance Sunday, it was 2020, when we were in the first stages of the Covid pandemic, before we knew how our lives would change for a while. We were in lockdown, and I was preaching to a screen, which was a new experience for me – and I suspect, to a lot of my listeners too. We couldn't travel then, we couldn't observe the traditions of Remembrance Sunday in person, or see our families and friends. Today we are much freer in terms of travel and our social lives – we can eat out, visit people, join together in worship, all the things we took for granted pre pandemic and perhaps now value a little more. Or perhaps we've heaved a great sigh of relief and got back to what we always thought of as normal.

But three years on, the world has changed. We may have relegated Covid to the same category as the common cold, but two years ago, Russia invaded Ukraine. War returned to Europe after an absence of seventy years. The world went into an economic recession. A scary thought that Russian tanks could be in France within a day or so. That war is still being slogged out. And then this year war broke out savagely in Gaza, where as many people have been killed in a few short weeks as in two years of the Ukraine/Russian conflict. We are living in perhaps the most dangerous times since the end of the Second World War.

Today we remember those whose lives have been lost not just in the World Wars but in far too many conflicts across the world, as people fight over ideology, land, power, food and freedom. Our chaplain Jamie will be at the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery in Marseille today along with the representatives of the British Consulate and the Royal Navy based in Toulon.

The Mazargues War Cemetery is about six kilometres from the city centre in Marseille 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 is quiet and peaceful in that walled garden, but so sad.

Just before the pandemic, Garry and I 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 a 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 16 memorials, in a village in New Zealand, was just as poignant. 16 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. And this year whilst in Northumberland, we visited the lovely gardens of Houghton Hall, the home of Earl Grey – of tea fame. There is a small church in the grounds with wonderful cross-stitch kneelers depicting local scenes, contributed by local families. But in the corner of the churchyard are five or six simple crosses – those of French naval personnel who died in the Second World War. A sobering reminder that even here, in remote Northumbria, war still stretched out its tentacles.

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 the 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 humankind never learns. Why have there been wars since the beginnings of our race? Research shows 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 look at the news today to see the tragedy that is war still being played out.

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.

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? What would he make of Jerusalem today?

Jesus 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. But the best memorial of all is to live our lives to the full. To enjoy and respect the freedoms we have, of travel, 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, of 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.