

SERMON: REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY 13.11.2022

John Jackson

Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalm 98

2 Thess. 3:6-16

Luke 21:5-19

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Many thanks to the Dean for inviting me to share some ideas on this day when we remember those who have died in wars.

Over the years I have attended many graduation ceremonies. Usually *Gaudeamus igitur* has been sung to accompany the academic procession. These are the opening words of a Medieval song, meaning “So let us rejoice.” Often it is sung like a hymn. After all, education is supposed to be a serious matter, and here homage is being paid to it by the wearing of church-like vestments. And as the song is in Latin (an important language of the Church), surely it must convey some moral message? Not at all! This is a student drinking song, and the emphasis is on the pursuit of pleasure: “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” (Eccl. 8.15, cf. 1 Cor. 15:32). I last heard it a month ago at a Rhodes University graduation, sung – for a change – exuberantly. It put a spring into many a professorial foot. Well done, Conductor Kepa!

Today throughout the world people are gathering at war memorials, many of which have been inscribed with the verse, also in Latin:

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori

“A sweet and honourable thing it is to die for one’s fatherland.”

The poet was Horace, a Roman who lived shortly before the time of Jesus, when Augustus was the emperor.

Pro patria mori – “to die for one’s fatherland”: The point is that it’s good to die fighting, not against your fellow-citizens, but for your country. As is the case in many cultures, the Romans distinguished between war against foreigners (“acceptable”) and civil war (“unacceptable”). But which was which? An uncomfortable reality was that Augustus came to power mainly through **civil** wars, the last of which was against his rival, Mark Antony, who had married the queen of Egypt, Cleopatra. Augustus declared war on Cleopatra, not Antony. Naming **her** as the enemy meant that this would be seen not as a civil war, which it **was**, but as a war against a foreigner, that is a “legitimate” war.

There is a parallel in South Africa, in the conflict that was finally resolved in 1994. For many years those who led the previous government claimed that “we” were fighting for “our” fatherland against “outsiders”, namely Communists from the Soviet Union and some of its allies. These countries were involved, but the conflict was more between fellow-South Africans: it was a **civil** war. It was helpful that the government at the time eventually came to accept this reality.

What about the context of the words: “A sweet and honourable thing it is to die for one’s fatherland”? If one reads the rest of the poem, this line seems to be no more a glorification of war against foreigners, than *Gaudeamus igitur* is a pious hymn. Horace is quoting an earlier Greek poet, Alcaeus, who took a cynical view of fighting for one’s country. What does Horace himself think? Having read the rest of the poem, I think his view is also cynical. Alcaeus and Horace admitted that when they were in a battle situation, they ran away. At any rate Horace seems to have left the verse there for readers to think about critically. A century ago, amidst the horrors of the First World War the poet Wilfred Owen quoted it and dismissed it as “the old Lie”. But those who have used it on war memorials have naively or conveniently ignored context.

I am not well qualified to speak about war. I have done military training and service, but I have never been involved in active combat. This does not mean that I see myself as less guilty than those who fought actively for a cause which to some extent was unjust, linked as it was with the ideology of apartheid. On the contrary, I admire those who (no matter what side they were on) have endured appalling physical and psychological sufferings, have been tremendously brave, and have even sacrificed their lives for others. This is truly Christian behaviour, even if some of those who sacrifice their lives are not technically Christian. Remember the verse from John’s Gospel (15:13): “There is no greater love than offering one’s life for those dear to one.”

I believe that there are many genuinely fine qualities associated with being “a good soldier”, including self-discipline. A long time ago I saw myself as potentially a soldier. The illusion lasted for less than a minute. It was my second month of military training. We were first issued with an uncomfortable uniform – a khaki babygrow (I think the technical term is “overalls”). Then we were provided with a more comfortable 2-piece safari suit. While I was strutting around in it, a bemused tent mate said: “John, you’ll never make a soldier. You’re always going to look like a missionary.” And so, more than 50 years later, here I stand, not as “the model of a modern major-general” (apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan), but as one who has been called to share some thoughts about spiritual things. This is about as close as I’ll ever get to being a missionary. Well, at least it also happens to be Mission Sunday.

And what has this “missionary” to share with you? Lots of confusion. Sometimes when I read accounts of wars, I can’t work out who won and who lost, particularly if I consider the longer term. Throughout history, it seems, a nation can win the battles, but lose the war. The Vietnam War is such an example. As for the Anglo-Boer War (or “South African War”), in raw military terms there was a “winner”, but over time the “losers” gained more power than they’d originally had. “The British won the war. The Boers won the peace.”

And since history tends to be presented from the perspective of the winners or at least those claiming that distinction, truth can be distorted. In my growing up years in the 60s and 70s, movies set in World War 2, which came from the side that had “won”, generally presented Germans as being cruel and stupid. But there is no evidence that cruelty is more a feature of German culture than of any other culture. Given similar circumstances, Nazism can arise anywhere, including countries that pride themselves on their humanity, like Britain. And stupidity? It did cross my mind that having Germans speaking to one another in heavily accented English, was evidence of stupidity in the makers of the movies.

Can any good be associated with war? Oddly perhaps, yes. It has helped to promote technological advances, for example in air travel, from which many people benefit. Even more beneficial are the advances in medical science. And let’s not forget those artistic creations which owe at least some of their depth to people’s experiences of war, whether as combatants or not. I mentioned the poet Wilfred Owen, who died from his injuries in the First World War. And there is the astonishing War Requiem by Benjamin Britten. During World War 2 Britten was a pacifist. Interestingly, much of the text that he has used comes from the poetry of Wilfred Owen. Progress, whether scientific or artistic, doesn’t justify war, but it can be seen as something good coming out of what is thoroughly bad.

But what about “good” in a more moral sense? Can there be such a thing as a “just war”? My knee-jerk reaction would be to say “no”, but I also recognise that actions by armies have sometimes been very effective in ending brutality and bringing peace. In this connection I am aware of helpful work done by United Nations Peacekeeping forces. Of course there is always a danger that when force responds to force, the situation can get badly out of control. Jesus makes this point when Peter slices off the ear of the chief priest’s servant in Gethsemane (Mt. 26:52). And let’s not undervalue the effectiveness of non-violent resistance and diplomacy, both of which were used with success in India’s struggle for independence and in the ending of the “Cold War”.

And staying with “cold”, if rather literally, I shall now be treading on thin ice. Should we not honour those who refuse to go to war, especially if the cause is clearly

unjust? In South Africa the fact that more and more conscripts were ignoring their call-up papers, intensified the then government's need to negotiate with its opponents. And what about those who surrender, as did South African general Hendrik Klopper at Tobruk in World War 2. He was sharply criticised, but this action saved many lives. Perhaps I have now fallen through the ice, and over the next point I am sinking into morally murky waters. Pierre Laval was prime minister of a puppet government in Nazi-occupied France. After the war this "vile traitor" (as many viewed him) was convicted of large scale collaboration with the enemy, and executed. But his collaboration probably had the effect of saving hundreds of thousands of lives.

Four years ago, to mark the centenary of the end of World War 1 there was a presentation on that war by Jeremy Fogg and Lynette Marais. Over 48 years no other National Arts Festival production has moved me more. There was no fancy technology: the power was in the words and their delivery. The sense of horror was overwhelming, and yet I realised that somehow, miraculously, human decency had triumphed. Shortly after that war it did so again, in the chapel of New College, Oxford. A memorial was put up with the names (lots of them) of students who had died in the war. No surprises there. But then, at his own expense the Warden of the college set up another memorial, with the words: "In memory of those who came from a foreign land, entered into the inheritance of this place, and returned to their land, dying for it." There follow three German names. A brave thing to do, especially given the jingoism of the times. This was Dr William Spooner, who is more famous for scrambling his consonants – hence "spoonerism". Clearly there was nothing scrambled about his independence of mind or greatness of heart.

Imminent war is part of the gloomy subject matter of today's gospel passage, together with persecution and natural catastrophes. But ultimately assurance is given: "No strand of your hair will be touched" (Luke 21:18). Yet if one is going to be persecuted, injuries will go way beyond a strand of hair. But let's not take this literally. In the wider scheme of things, and beyond our mortal lives, all **will** be well, in the power and love of the risen Christ.

As we remember those who have died in conflicts, let us be open to the power of God's love, remembering that wars **can** be stopped and prevented. Let's give thanks that 30 years ago this country was spared the escalation of civil war. Let us trust the Lord to use us to bring about apparently impossible reconciliations: for the wolf and lamb to feed together (Is. 65:25). With the psalmist, let us sing a new song (Psalm 98:1), or even an old one (like *Gaudeamus igitur*) but in a new context, in which we rejoice, not in pleasures of the moment, but in the peace that we make and keep with our fellow human beings.

Whether old or new, music can often express more than words. In place of the formal Prayers of the Church, I invite you in your hearts to remember those who have died in conflict, and to give thanks for good things and acts of kindness, most of all those which, contrary to our expectations, have come out of awful situations such as war. As we do so, Jonathan will play on his flute a poignant tune which – appropriately again on this Sunday – some of you will recognise from the movie “The Mission”.

To the one who made the supreme sacrifice for all people, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, be all praise and glory. Amen.