

Remembrance Sunday 2018 – Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries

Dear friends and fellow members of the Barnes community. We are here to do two things today. First of all, we remember. Remembering is a fundamental part of being human. And we do this not just on our own with our personal memories but with others. We do this on happy occasions, as when we remember a birthday by inviting others for a party. And we do it on sombre occasions, when we give thanks for someone with a memorial service. This is a sombre occasion when we come together as a community here in Barnes, as communities come together all over the country, to remember those who died or were wounded in the two great wars of the 20th century and the conflicts since then. There are still some here who will have poignant, personal memories of one of those conflicts, whose families have been affected. None of us have personal memories of the First World War, but successive generations remain haunted by it. Because of the early film footage and the moving poetry that came out of it, it is very much part of us. In recent weeks there have been many moving memories shown on TV which has brought it vividly alive again. We had the two minutes silence outside to remember them, as well as those killed in World War II and more recent wars, as a mark of respect and honour and sadness. Especially on this 100th anniversary of the armistice on November 11th, 1918 do we remember, as a society, the huge tragic losses of that time. The book we placed on the memorial contained the names of some 320 people from the old Barnes Parish killed in that war. Then, and later, young lives cut short and undeveloped, lives blighted by physical and mental wounds, families left grieving. We do not talk easily of duty or sacrifice these days. And I am sure those who volunteered or were called up to fight for their country had the usual mixture of motives that we have. But part of that mixture was a sense of duty, a feeling that something very big was at stake, a desire to do what they could to stop the spread of tyranny. This morning we recognise that the fundamental rights and freedoms we take for granted in this country were fought for and safeguarded by them.

Because of the terrible losses of the First World War our forebears who lived in the 1920's and 30's was desperate to avoid another one. But by 1940 even the most pacific inclined had very reluctantly conclude that armed resistance to

the Nazis was a moral necessity. In making that resistance a reality they did indeed put aside, that is, sacrifice a great deal of what they would otherwise have valued and enjoyed. The book we placed on the memorial contained the names of some 180 people from the old Barnes parish killed in that war. We remember, respect and honour that commitment. That is our first purpose today: but let us also bear in mind those who stood up to tyranny in their own country. For me one of the most moving words that came out of World War II was the letter of a 16-year-old farm labourer in Germany to his parents. Only 16 years old, not much older than some of the cubs and scouts in church today. He wrote:

‘Dear Parents, I must give you bad news-I have been condemned to death, I and Gustave. We did not sign up for the SS and so they condemned us to death. My comrade Gustave did not sign up either. Both of us would rather die than stain our consciences with such deeds of horror. I know what the SS has to do. Oh, my dear parents, difficult as it is for me and for you, forgive me everything.’

Edmund Burke said that society is a partnership, a partnership between the past, the present and those yet to be born. We have acknowledged our debt to the past. So, secondly, let us also acknowledge our duty to those yet to be born. For this we renew our own commitment to be peacemakers. “Blessed are the peacemakers” said Jesus “for they shall be called children of God”. There is nothing wishy washy about this peace. When Martin Luther King was in prison because of his work to secure basic human rights for black people a group of pastors wrote to him to tell him to cool it. He wrote back “Peace is not the absence of tension but the presence of justice”. That is the biblical peace, a peace founded on justice. So those who work for justice, for the dignity of all human beings are also peacemakers. Again, as Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail for they shall be satisfied.” To oppose bullying, to stand up against name calling on social media, to bring a calm voice into the abusive debates of our time, is to be a peacemaker.

That peacemaking has to begin within ourselves. For there is a part of all human beings, however tiny, which wants to cause mischief and division. The Christian church has always asked us to go be honest and search out any of this

which might lurk inside our own hearts. It does so offering at the same time, the surpassing peace of Christ himself. For as the first Christians discovered, Christ is our peace. He is what Wordsworth described as “the central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation.” Rooted in the calm and strength of that peace, on behalf of those yet to be born, we ask God to help us strive for justice, for reconciliation, and an end to all enmity.

The Corrymeela Community, a community in Northern Ireland dedicated to reconciliation, has a prayer which I think gets it right. It reads

Show us, good Lord,
The peace we should seek,
The peace we must give,
The peace we can keep,
The peace we must forgo
And the peace you have given
In Jesus Christ our Lord.