

Remembrance Day 2020

'Put away your sword, said the Lord Jesus. Those who take the sword, shall perish by the sword.'

And so saying, according to most early Christian teaching, Jesus disarmed every soldier. Put away your swords. In the beginning, we think, the Church took this at face value. To be a Christian meant not being a soldier. Fighting and killing were part of the old world. Christians lived in the new one, God's kingdom, of which the prophet Micah had spoken: they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. They shall not learn war. Enemies are there to be loved, not slaughtered. Offence is there to be forgiven, not avenged.

It didn't last. The story of how the Cross of peace quickly turned into a military banner, how the Roman Empire took over Christianity, is well known. It can be told as simply one of betrayal: how men took Jesus' very simple, very pure command: *put away your swords*, and chose to ignore it because they wanted power and glory and money. Or indeed, maybe because they simply liked war. That is in large measure a very convincing way of describing what happened. And if it was the whole truth, even this service would be yet another example of the betrayal. Of fusing together the God of peace, the man from Nazareth, with our very different religions: of nationalism, of militarism, of violence. Anyone who thinks that danger is not there on Remembrance Day is deluding themselves.

However, betrayal is not the only way of telling the story. You could equally say that what happened was this: fairly quickly, Christians came to realise that they didn't actually live in a new world. They might want to, but they did not: Micah's Kingdom had not yet come, and the old world was very much still here – snarling, chaotic and armed to the teeth. In such a world, sometimes, sadly, the only way to defend the things God cared about - peace, justice, the poor and the weak – was to fight for them. Put away your swords might work if it's just *your* survival at stake, maybe. It's not such obviously morally brilliant advice when barbarians are slaughtering the innocent. In those circumstances, you can choose purity, or you can choose responsibility. You keep your hands clean but watch the villages burn, or you pick your sword up again and kill some barbarians.

By and large, the Church chose responsibility. Chose the sword. Now, when you do that the risk is you forget what it costs. Because it costs a great deal. It costs not just the lives that are given, those whose sacrifice we honour today. It costs too the lives that were taken, the lives of the barbarians, of our enemies in all the wars, the lives of the poor innocents that we killed, from whose point of view we seemed the barbarians. All those poor Germans or Japanese or Iraqis or Afghans loved by God, and loved by their family, as much as each one of those names carved out there on our memorial. Each one, no matter what side they were on, no matter even what they themselves had done, each one the beloved and precious child of God. When we gather together today to remember, the first thing we remember is the *cost* of war. However necessary we think it was, however just, still the terrible, terrible cost which breaks the heart of God and which should break ours.

And yet somehow, usually, it does not. Instead, we find all sorts of ways to harden our hearts, to stop them from breaking. We dress up the death. On our own side we call it a sweet and glorious to die for one country, to make undaunted the final sacrifice. On the others, we dehumanise our enemies, or we lie to ourselves about how many we actually killed and how innocent they actually were, we call them collateral damage and refuse to think about them too much. Now look, I am no pacifist. I'm not saying that war can never be justified. I'm glad our armed forces are there and ready to fight. But I am saying that the cost of doing so is always, always terrible. Terrible in lives lost, terrible in the moral and spiritual damage done to the people and nations that do it. Truly, those who take the sword – however good their reasons – perish in a multitude of ways.

Remembrance Day is a for facing all that. It is an almost unbearable day. As the poet said, 'humankind cannot bear very much reality.' And that is why it is really important that this service is not just a Remembrance Day service, this is a Christian Eucharist. Indeed, another, different act of remembrance. With bread and wine in a few moments, we will remember another victim of military force, another violent death. But we will dare to say this one is different. That the one the Roman army put to death on Calvary hill went there for us and our salvation – which means that, because of his story, the stories behind the names on our memorial, of our victims, of our own lost moral integrity – all those stories are changed. We do not end, after all, despite all, any of us, in sadness, and loss, in guilt and graveyards. We are taken up into the bigger story of Jesus – and the ending of that story is Resurrection. Whatever else that means, and it is a mystery, it means the story ends in love and joy and healing. The dead, the guilty, the heroes, the barbarians, the innocent, the compromised – the story ends in love and joy and healing. The one who made them loves them still, and through Christ claims them as his own, and has a future for them.

That can be astonishingly hard to believe. It was hard on the first Easter morning; it is hard on Remembrance Day in Abbots Langley twenty one centuries later. But it is the Gospel: that Jesus Christ came to save sinners and raise the dead. May we each receive grace to believe it and hope it ever more deeply and strongly.