

## Remembrance Day 2018

In January 1919 the Vicar of Abbots Langley, Arthur Parnell, wrote this in the parish magazine:

*'I am very glad that we have decided to erect a memorial to those who have fallen in the war worthy of their memory. I think any worthy memorial should constantly speak to us of sacrifice. They, perhaps all unknowingly and very far behind, followed in the steps of Jesus Christ, who upon the Cross made a willing sacrifice of Himself. The Cross erected in the churchyard, right in the centre of the village, with their names engraved upon it, will speak to generations yet unborn of their sacrifice and stand as an incentive to others.'*

It will speak to generations yet unborn. That is, to us. So one hundred years later, what does it say?

It speaks of noble, splendid things, things which echo across the years and inspire us today. Of men with a sense of duty – duty to each other, duty to their King, duty to their country. Of people who knew they belonged to something greater than themselves, who knew there was more to life than just their own self-interest.

Of a whole community pulling together, when those at home worked hard and underwent great sacrifices themselves to support those at the front. When the things that divided us: class, education, sex, religion ceased to matter quite so much, and we really were one United Kingdom, united in one struggle for great shining truths: for the rights of small nations not be trampled over, to be able to live in freedom and peace and security.

It speaks of great courage, of people who grim month after month, year after year saw things, did things, endured things which most of us could not bear for a day.

Yes, Revd. Parnell was right. That Cross still speaks, and it questions us. Are you of the calibre of these men? Are you worthy of their names, carved in the heart of the village?

But we can't stop there. Because one hundred years on, gazing at that Cross, we know that it does not just tell us of noble things. It speaks too of shameful things. Which back then, and for long thereafter, we preferred not to speak but which must now be named.

Take, for example, *killing*. That's something the rhetoric of sacrifice, all this talk of following in the steps of Jesus, tends to mask. Men did not go to the front to give their lives. They went to the front to take other people's. And we may think the cause was just, we may think there was no alternative, and we may indeed be right – but that does not change the fact that what we did was sin. To kill another human being, however justified we may think it, however much there may be no alternative, is always and everywhere *sin*. That Cross says *repent*.

And let's remember the type of killing it was. This was not noble, dignified knights on horseback playing by the rules, with codes of conduct and honour. This was poison gas, on both sides. This was war against civilians, on both sides. We both tried to starve each other's populations, and because our Navy was vastly superior we did a better job of it than

Germany. She could not import the food she needed to feed her people, because we blocked the ships. And so when nearly a million people died of famine in Central Europe in 1916-17, that was on us. You may think it was justified, you may think there was no alternative, you may think they'd have done the same to us – and you may be right - but it was sin. To starve another person, no matter what your excuse, is always and everywhere *sin*. That Cross says *repent*.

And it says to this Church *repent*. Because by and large, the Church of England blessed all this. Bishops said this was a good war, a holy war. Vicars banged the drum and told everyone to sign up, told them it was God's work, told them they were following Jesus, and did not ask too many questions. We dressed up the great sin in our finest language: love, honour, duty, sacrifice. We made war look like something noble, something beautiful, and to us that Cross says *repent*.

To repent means to turn. And where that Cross asks us to turn is to the one who hung on it, to Jesus of Nazareth. It is in him alone, faced with a catastrophe as great as war, as great as sin, that we find our hope.

We find hope for the dead, for all those millions of them. Each one of them was made and loved by God, and each one of them is still made and loved by God. Jesus of Nazareth conquered death. That is the very heart of the Gospel. And whilst we may not know exactly what it means, what it looks like, we know it means this: death has lost its sting. Death has lost its victory. Those dead men live. They are with Jesus, with God. They are being tended, healed, changed into everlasting splendour.

We find hope for the guilty, for all those millions of them. Jesus of Nazareth forgives sin: that is the very heart of the Gospel. For every one who killed, for every one who cheered them on, for every one who rejoiced in the death of one of God's children, there is still hope. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do, prayed Jesus on his Cross. They haven't begun to realise quite how terrible, quite how deadly, is their sin, their violence. They haven't begun to realise the damage they do to themselves, how their souls are dying. Forgive them, heal them.

We find hope for change, for ourselves. Jesus of Nazareth changes lives; that is the very heart of the Gospel. He takes those who have done terrible things and got used to terrible things, he takes the violent, the warlike, the cowardly and the hateful and he makes them new. He makes them, like Himself. He takes those who are weary, those who are desperate, those who are overwhelmed by the sheer pain and chaos of it all, and he makes them strong. He gives them the courage and the wisdom to be people of peace. He can do it for you.

That Cross speaks. It speaks of noble things, and it speaks of terrible things. It speaks above all of Jesus Christ, and asks us to turn to him. This Remembrance Day, may we heed its voice.

**Peter Waddell**