

Remembrance Sunday Cathedral 2018. #Armistice100

Once again we have come together to give thanks to the God who delivered us and to remember the brave who have laid down their lives for their loved ones and for their country.

This practice of keeping Remembrance began way back. Originally known as Armistice Day, And from 1923-1931 Armistice was held on the Monday of the week in which November 11th fell, but in 1931, Allan Neill introduced a bill to hold Armistice Day on a fixed day, on November 11th itself, and it was during this bill's introduction that it was decided that the word Remembrance be used in place of Armistice. Then some years ago it was standardised to the Sunday nearest to the 11th and so here we are today in a wonderful coincidence that Remembrance and Armistice have fallen together at the centenary.

And above all others, we owe it to the Royal British Legion for keeping this promise of Remembrance before us each year, and for all they and other bodies do to help those who still suffer as the result of war – we say thank you to them – because they have remained true to their promise, that:

“at the going down of the sun and in the morning – we will remember them”

And the pain and grief of wars are still strong in the hearts of many today – some still mourning the loss of loved ones who never returned from the two world wars, but still more raw will be those who have lost recently. Since the end of the Second World War there have only been two years in which no Armed Forces personnel were killed on operations; 1968 and 2016. Amongst the armed forces community, nearly everyone knows someone who was killed in either Iraq or Afghanistan, and you only have to take a drive up to the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire to see the heartwrenching tributes that are left at the foot of the engraved walls.

The main memorial is breathtakingly moving and often the tributes put the cold stone names into human perspective “We miss you daddy” – ‘Lovingly remembered,’ ‘Too many happy memories to be forgotten,’ ‘Died as he had lived – loved by all,’ ‘Cofion annwylaf.’

Siegfried Sassoon, the famous war poet said – “The song was wordless/ The singing will never be done”

We're of course remembering 100 years since the signing of the Armistice at 11 am on the 11th November on a train carriage in the middle of a forest 37 miles to the north of Paris. It marked a cessation of violence – troops were still being killed up to two minutes before the paper was signed – but the sad irony is that the signal had been sent from Army Headquarters at 10 am that morning to the front – It declared “Hostilities cease 1100 today. Troops will stand fast on the outpost line already established. All military precautions will be observed and there will be no communication with the enemy. Further instructions later. Acknowledge.” There were no mobile phones, there was no BOWMAN, although pencil and paper might well do just as well when it isn't working – runners had to be sent up the lines and into the trenches. Nobody knew what would happen at 11 am. And I wonder how the signaller who sent that message felt and how the signallers in all their dugouts across the Western front felt as the message came through in Morse code.

But whilst the fighting stopped, the tensions remained and the Armistice had to be extended a further three times until January 1920 following the treaty of Versailles, with

the political promise that no such world wide atrocity would be committed again. Within fifteen years of Armistice Day, the battle drums were beating across Europe and would soon spread to another World War. So how far have we come, what have we learned in these last 100 years? Have the deaths of the fallen been in vain, or did they bring about a new world order, a united world, a world united against injustice? Since the end of the Second World War, our armed forces have been deployed in numerous major conflicts – Korea, N.Ireland, Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan to name but a few and as peace keepers in the Middle East, Cyprus, parts of Africa, the Balkans - the list goes on and on.

So what about this world that we live in – is a safer, better place? Well outwardly, we've never had it so good; our standard of living is high, we all have gadgets around the house – those of you who own your own houses never imagined that they could be worth so much in 2018. Our old folk live longer because of the advances in medicine and the brilliance of our doctors.

But there is a hardness and viciousness about our society that has not been known for centuries. There is terrifying lawlessness; terrorist plots, mugging, thuggery, rape and child abuse are seemingly everywhere – so in answer to my own question – is it a better world, no its not. It's very much a TV world because that's where we learn it all and celebrity, they say is the new religion.

But there is a pointlessness about it all – a lack of purpose – of vision – we are a nation adrift, lost in the mighty universe. And what can we say to it all? What hope is there? Is there any hope?

I want to be bold enough to suggest to you that the Bible still has something to say about it all. The old fashioned bible – that neglected coffee table book – but to those who believe, it is the word of God! Anyway, I found a chapter, way back in the Book of Exodus which could have been written for us today – 'and the Lord said to Moses, "Leave this place, go up to the land I promised you – I will drive out the people of the land – go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you because you are a stiff necked (obstinate) people and I might destroy you on the way! When the people heard these words they began to mourn."

Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp, some distance away and call it the tent of meeting. Chaplains on Operations do similar things although because of the danger it is always somewhere within the wire – I've seen churches built out of Hesco (sand filled mesh containers) and tents turned into Chapels and called 'St. Wilfrid's in the Sands' or just 'The Vicarage' in an almost surreal normality. As in Moses day, anyone wanting to go to pray would go to the tent, and when Moses himself went out to the tent to pray everyone waited to hear what God had said to him. And we're told that Moses prayed to the Lord, 'Teach me your ways, so that I may continue to find favour with you. And the Lord said, 'My presence shall go with you and I will give you rest.'

Very often the things we read in the bible can be paralleled with our own experience and things that are going on today

"Go up to the land I promised you but I will not be with you," God said.

What words! What is the use of having everything in life that is good – if God is not with us? And that's the heart of our trouble today – we have in many ways reached our promised land – outwardly – we have never had it so good, we so much better off than our fathers, grandfathers great grandfathers were – but the whole thing has turned sour in our mouths. Why? I will not go with you. That's our trouble, 'You are a stiff necked, rebellious and

obstinate people – and I will not go with you. We have accepted the gifts and not the giver, Days, months, years we have left him out and ignored him – and its been infused throughout our society, through our political system right down to our communities. And I have no doubt that our emptiness and our drifting and our deep unhappiness, if the truth be told, are because we have lost sight of God, and it's a dreadful thing to lose sight of your beacon.

We have wonderful standards here today and you will often see regimental colours laid up in churches - the whole point of the colours was that they could be seen on the battlefield and were the rallying point in the fog of war – one of the worst things that could happen to a regiment was that the colours be taken, and so if you were an infanteer and had become separated from the body of your unit you could rally on the colours when the bugler sounded – the rank Colour sergeant was created to protect the ensign who carried the colours because the most bitter fighting often took place around them. In the Crimean War, once battle had been joined the colour party were sent to the rear because they endured such heavy losses at the front and they ceased to be carried into battle in 1881. You can imagine the disorientation of battle and losing all sense of direction, without the colours to rally on, there is a pointlessness to your engagement because without organisation, you will lose.

It's the same for you and me – God is our standard, our colour and without him, we are lost in the battle, ensued by a sense of pointlessness.

“I will not go with you,” God has said to us. You may have never heard Him – but to those of us who study these things and listen to his voice we know it. We are further from God as a nation than we have been for a thousand years, and so we need to retrace our steps as individuals and as a nation to that place/that point where we lost the companionship of God.

So in the story of Moses, what happens next, well the people when they heard that God was not going with them, they began to mourn – what for? Well they felt sorry for having neglected God, for having turned their backs on him, they were sorry and they said so and then they prayed. Do you pray? We often leave prayer until the last minute when we reach a crisis point and then we realise that we don't know what to say – its like being given a radio without having had any signals training. Its all gibberish unless we know what to say and what to ask for. And Moses prayed for God to teach him his ways – Teach me your ways – and this is what he means, show me what to do, the way I should think, react, live. Moses got to the point in all this that he was willing for God to do anything with him, if only he could see his face again, if only he could be reassured by his presence. And God speaks to him maybe the loveliest words in the whole bible. “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

We have not entered into that world which those young men of the two great wars died to win for us, because we have tried to build it without God, and because we have lost sight of the colours in the midst of the battle, our world has become disoriented and topsy turvey. And we need to pray earnestly, pray like we have never prayed before, for those Colours to be raised again, Christ's colours, and even now we might hear those words: “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

“And all manner of things shall be well.”