

The Address for VE Day 2020 – Canon Leigh Richardson, Sub Dean, 9 May 2020

We don't celebrate war or conflict by remembering those who lost their lives to liberate Europe from the tyranny of the Nazis and of fascism in 1945. And so our commemoration today is one of thanksgiving - thanksgiving at our deliverance from tyranny, and an opportunity for this generation to remember and reflect on the sacrifices of that generation, which should never be forgotten, and we will remain true to our promise that "at the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them".

No doubt war draws out both the best and the worst in people. Some combination of motives lead to millions of soldiers giving their lives in warfare during the last bloody century.

I wonder in these unprecedented times what we would you be willing to lay down our lives for? Belonging to a generation that has mostly escaped that searching question, we are so gripped by films like Saving Private Ryan, Steven Spielberg's portrayal of the D Day landings. And from the safety of our sofas we marvel at such bravery and wonder how we might have reacted in such situations.

In that film a patrol is sent to bring a soldier out of the fierce fighting of the front line, so that he can be returned to his family. His three brothers have all been killed. The members of the patrol risk their lives to fetch him. Some die. And there is a debate that keeps surfacing amongst them: Is the safety of this one person worth them laying their lives on the line? What is it that makes laying down your life worthwhile?

When Jesus was on the point of laying down his life, he challenged his disciples to be ready to do the same. You can find his words in John 15:12-14, This is what he said:

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command."

What do we make of that for our own lives? Because the fact is, this is a challenge not just for those disciples, or for soldiers following orders, but for us today, in our brave new world of social media and the internet. Three points need to be made. The first is this:

THE GREATEST LOVE IS TO LAY DOWN YOUR LIFE FOR YOUR FRIENDS

When Jesus says that the greatest love is to lay down your life for your friends, he is saying that the greatest love puts no ceiling on what it is prepared to give for the sake of others. When the greatest love goes into action, it lays down no limit to how far it will go in purposeful self-sacrifice. We are not talking about futile gestures. We are not talking about a pointless death. Rather, this kind of love engages in purposeful self-sacrifice. And the purpose is the good of others.

A recent old soldier's obituary quoted the citation that accompanied his award of the Military Cross. He was, it said, "completely imperturbable under heavy artillery and mortar fire" and carried on his work with "complete disregard for his own safety". "He has been completely unsparing of himself..." it concluded.

He did not spare himself. Once we have accepted that benchmark, then we can begin to assess the way we love against that benchmark.

The Second point is that **JESUS LAID DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS ENEMIES**

When Jesus teaches us, it is not a matter of doing what he says and not what he does. He practises what he preaches, even to the point of dying for those who are deeply hostile towards him. So he says in John 15.12:

"Love each other as I have loved you". He died in order to turn his enemies into his friends. He died to liberate us from sin and death.

One soldier recalled participating in the liberation of France following the Normandy landings:

... we found villagers and townspeople who clustered beside the road, waving and throwing flowers, and shouting words of encouragement as we sped by. If we paused for a moment's respite, amidst our own sweat and dust, they would run

to greet us, arms outstretched, with tears of joy streaming down their cheeks. Five years of emotional deprivation expressed itself in a volcanic surge of feeling which engulfed us all. I was hugged and kissed until my face and ribs ached... we struggled for the appropriate word in either language that somehow never expressed or matched the moment...

Jesus died to liberate us. And on the cross he won the decisive victory. So how do we should we live in the light of this?

Well if **we are friends of Jesus then we should love other as he loved us** – and that's the final point.

A medical officer who closely observed the aircrews of Bomber Command came to the conclusion that we each have a finite stock of courage. The battle-hardened veteran was a mythical figure: sustained exposure to danger did not harden a soldier but eroded his limited resources. What armed forces needed was a system of rotation in and out of battle which eked out that stock of courage. Our resources of the greatest love are indeed severely limited, if not non-existent. But the resources of Jesus are unlimited. If we are to live and love like him, we need to be drawing on his resources and not relying on our own.

Age may not weary them, but it wearies us. If we can just live in the light of Jesus' greatest teaching, then we will find our work never completed, our energies never wasted, and our capacity to love increased. Amen.