

A solemn commemoration service to mark the Centenary of the beginning of the First World War

Sunday 3 August 2014, Portsmouth Cathedral

In the cathedral parish of St Albans, uniquely in the country, there is not a community or parish war memorial but ten surviving WW1 street memorials. I know them well from my time as sub dean of that cathedral and parish priest. Unveiled in 1920 and 1921 they commemorate the dead of 1914-18. Street by street, in the places where they had lived, the families and neighbours who they'd left for the war, the names of those who fought and died, and did not return home, are listed on the outside walls of houses in the street. It's very powerful. As time passes, of course, memory fades. In some cases, the memorials have been whitewashed over in what I'd call vandalism, as the names no longer have any meaning to the current residents of the street or house, or more likely because they are an uncomfortable reminder of what the house-owners wanted to forget or thought might deter potential buyers. But back in the 1920s, those names would've conjured up the faces and the characters of cherished family members, of school friends and fellow soldiers. The men who died continued to be present to those communities, their names a daily meeting of the living and the dead, an affirmation of their continuing belonging and the love in which they were held, even beyond the grave.

I have never lost loved ones on the scale of the loss experienced in the war. I can't pretend to have lost multiple members of my family at a stretch as people did with such regularity during that dreadful war; nor have I watched my friends die under such brutal and horrific conditions. But I have lost someone I love very deeply – my first wife, Julia, who died thirteen years ago. Although life has moved on and I have been blessed with a second wife whom I cherish, Julia remains very much with me. Her influence continues to infuse my life, and I am conscious that at each significant moment of my life – at my consecration as bishop, at the successes of our children, at my entry into the House of Lords – I am aware of how she would have reacted, her enjoyment or otherwise of the new turns my life has taken, her tone of voice as she earthed me when I got carried away, her delight in the achievements of her family.

People live on, in spirit and in reality, long after their deaths. It isn't just romanticism or imaginative theology that prompts us, in our Eucharistic prayer at services of Holy Communion to join "with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven" as we sing of God's holiness. The living and the dead really do unite around the altar of the Eucharist and their witness really does surround us as the years pass and our lives develop and change. In the streets of our towns and villages through the years of the first world war and in the aftermath, the dead were kept alive in new and imaginative ways. In St Albans Abbey parish, they literally inscribed their love into the walls of their streets and houses, so that the names and characters of those they continued to cherish remained present to them throughout their lives. And up and down the country, war memorials, which were until the Great War quite rare, appeared and liturgy was invented, so that whole communities and in time the whole nation ensured that we did not forget our own. In his seminal history of the Church in the First World War our very own, until recently anyway, Canon Alan Wilkinson notes that bishops rushed around their dioceses in the years following 1918 dedicating

those town and village memorials which did not celebrate war but mourned the dead, individually as well as corporately.

It is the great tragedy of our time, that this immense and deep love, transcending death and revealed through such grief, did not translate itself into our political processes. The bare and ugly fact of the matter is that lessons were not learned in the war billed as ending all wars. The Great War was swiftly followed by the Second World War, and with them came some of the most disgusting acts of human barbarity ever witnessed. And after the high talk of peace in the world, that was in turn followed all too swiftly by Rwanda, by Bosnia, by Iraq.

Wilfred Owen captures the outrage in the poem we heard a moment ago, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," in which, faced with a decision to sacrifice a ram or sacrifice human life, an individual chooses, through arrogance and stubbornness, to seal the fate of countless young men, many so very young that we might call them children. We cannot fail to spot the discrepancy with the Old Testament story in which Abraham does not kill Isaac. Wilfred Owen was writing in the first world war but he could equally have been writing in the 1940s or the 1990s or in our day. The stubborn affirmation in the poetry of the dignity and the heroism of individual soldiers cannot obscure the absurdity and the offence. In another poem Owen describes the men consigned to death in battle as cattle, not to belittle them but to emphasise that in this war there were new levels of depersonalisation which over the century have developed into the impersonal long-distance stealth warfare and clinical killing. With all the commemorations that are taking place this year, it is too easy to lapse into accepting the inevitability of war, or, worse, into glorifying it. It is too easy to forget that behind every war lies the spectacular failure of human beings to communicate with one another in a way that leads to peace.

And so it is with deep ambivalence that I stand here today. I want, of course, wholeheartedly to honour the ideals for which so many people died; to give thanks for their sacrifice and the sacrifice of their families. As a Christian and a priest, I can and must look beyond death into the promise of resurrection life. But as I look through the pictures of the men who died, as I read the lists of names that are still on display in every town and village in our country, I remain dismayed that love has not prevailed; that as our technologies become all the more sophisticated and our weapons of war so much more deadly, we have still not learned the fundamentals of how to prevent such suffering. As today we take the time to remember, in love, those who died and those who suffered their loss, I pray that we may hear and heed their voices today. May we, in our various spheres of life and with our different gifts, be instrumental in shaping our society and our political processes, so that, for God's sake, for our sake, for the sake of those we love, the next century may be one of dialogue, and deepening trust, and life.

Bishop Christopher
August 3, 2014