

Remembrance Day Service

I never knew one of my uncles. Bernard was my mother's favourite brother, just a few years older than her. He died when he was a teenager, old enough to vote – just – but not yet old enough to drink. His plane was shot down over the English Channel in the second world war. Three of the crew survived, including Bernard. They had two life rafts, which could take 2 men each. One was fully functional, the other was damaged. Bernard volunteered to go in the damaged one. The other two crew members were rescued. Bernard was never seen again.

There's a line from a Siegfried Sassoon poem that has been on my mind as we prepared to mark the 100th anniversary of the armistice, the end of World War 1. He was a poet and a soldier who lived through the hell of the trenches and saw the peace that followed. He writes words about his generation's attitude to soldiers and veterans that challenge us still: "You love us when we're heroes, home on leave... You believe That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace."ⁱ

'You believe that chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.' I do believe in chivalry – in the virtue of courage offered in defense of other people and of values that matter to us. I am deeply proud of my unknown uncle for putting other lives ahead of his own. I greatly respect all those who fought against Nazism – the allies from the United States, from Great Britain and the commonwealth, from Scandinavia and Europe - including Germans who tried to bring down Hitler from within. This was an evil that had to be opposed – just as we must oppose the antisemitism and racism we see today.

But I also believe in the second part of Sassoon's line – that war is a disgrace. That there is nothing glorious about human beings settling their disputes by killing one another. That there is nothing heroic in nation states unable to build peace with justice except through sending their young men - and now young women also – to die at one another's hands. I'm with that other great poet of the first world war, Wilfred Owen, when he says we should 'not tell with such high zest to children ardent for some desperate glory, the old lie: dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.'ⁱⁱ It may sometimes be necessary but it is always tragic never sweet and fitting.

This beautiful cathedral in which we meet today is here for a very simple reason. It is to help us try to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. The one who taught us to love our enemies. The one who revealed a God who calls us to turn weapons into farm implements and promises a time when no-one shall make us afraid. And so all worship which happens within these walls is to a God who chooses peace over war, who chooses forgiveness over revenge, who chooses love over hatred. And who calls us to make these very same choices in our own lives.

God's vision for us and for our world is one in which we no longer have to fight against injustice or for the rights of the oppressed because all people will be loved, respected and able to flourish. God's vision is of a world where divine love is fully known and every child of every race and nation is safe and fed. Where no-one shoots Jewish seniors as they worship together or college students as they relax together. Where no leaders threaten each other's people with mass destruction and put the profits of conglomerates over the future of the planet. Where we no longer fear those who are different from ourselves but love to learn from them and to share our own truths with them.

But we know we have not yet achieved that vision. Not even our own country, let alone our world, embodies peace and justice for all. And some of those who have paid the dearest price for this are our veterans. Remember that line from Sassoon began 'you love us when we're heroes home on leave'. We are not actually very good at loving our veterans. Honouring them, maybe, on days like this. But not offering them the practical love that would make dealing with the stress of moving back into civilian life, let alone the torment of PTSD, easier to bear. Our veterans and their families carry the wounds of humanity's aggression and imperfection and deserve the care and support of us all.

Let me tell you another family war story. My dad was in Germany in the last weeks of the second world war. At one point he stepped into an opening in the woods at the same moment as a German soldier. They looked at one another across the clearing and then each turned their back and walked away. We are not made for war. We are not made to kill. We are made for peace. We are made for mutuality and shared delight. It is up to us in our generation to do all we can to build peace in our homes, our cities, our country and our world.

There are moments when God's vision of peace for the world feels a little closer to us. One of those moments was the one that we commemorate today – armistice, the end of the years of brutal death that made up the first world war. And I want to finish with another poem of Siegfried Sassoon. One that speaks to the hope for peace and the joyful fulfilment of God's love made real on earth. It's called 'Everyone Sang'

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on - on - and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun:
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away ... O, but Everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

ⁱ From the poem 'Glory of Women' in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (1918).

ⁱⁱ From the poem 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' in *Poems* (Viking Press, 1921).