

Remembering

14 11 10

Ever-living God,
we remember those whom you have gathered from the storms of war
into the peace of your presence;
may that same peace calm our fears,
bring justice to all peoples
and establish harmony among the nations,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

My text may be found in the gospel according to St John, chapter 15 and verse 13:
'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'

I was born on September 3rd, ten years after the declaration of the Second World War. I am over sixty but even so I am too young to have been conscripted or to have done National Service though I know for a fact that the Revd Dr John Marvell did and for a time was stationed at Catterick! All the Wars fought by the United Kingdom since 1960: the Falklands; The Gulf; Iraq and Afghanistan were fought and being fought by professionals and did not involve our civilian population being attacked by a foreign army, navy or air force though acts of terrorism may well be another matter! I cannot know, as my parents knew, the very real danger of death or the threat of invasion but it does not mean that I can't appreciate the value and the sacrifice of those who earn their living fighting for and defending our country against possible enemies.

'Appreciate' is the key word: to understand and to value the cost of keeping us safe; of maintaining the values enshrined in our democracy. Through the cinema and through literature, I can feel something of what it means to be a professional 'soldier' in the 21st century. The BAFTA and Oscar-winning film by Kathryn Bigelow, 'The Hurt Locker', which I reviewed in the May Newsletter, was an eye-opener to the dangers faced by a bomb-disposal team in Iraq. 'War' by Sebastian Junger recommended to me in September by David Norris makes clear what is involved in modern warfare.

For 12 months in 2007 and 2008, Junger, an American journalist, was embedded with a frontline American infantry platoon in the Korengal Valley in eastern Afghanistan near the Pakistan border. His account of the experience presents a 'true' picture of the soldiers, the conditions they lived and fought in and the values that made them an effective fighting force. To be a 'good' soldier, you had to be well resourced, physically fit but above all committed to the team of men with whom you fought. The ethos that all the men of Second Platoon shared was a readiness to sacrifice their lives for the good of the group. Each one had total trust in his comrades: that he would not be abandoned or left alone; that his friends would rather die themselves than desert him when he most needed them. This code of loyalty to each other meant that each member of the squad or the platoon had confidence in their own worth in the eyes of each other: each man was prepared to die for his friends.

It is curious to discover so Christian an ethic reflected in the code which informs and shapes the behaviour of a company of fighting men. What these rough and

ready American infantrymen are embodying is the Christ-like preparedness to lay down their own lives for the lives of their comrades-in-arms. It is a recognition that the group as a whole is more important than the individual but that each individual is respected and valued because he is a member of the group.

The difference between Christ's preparedness to lay down his life for others and the ready willingness of members of Second Platoon Battle Company to lay down their lives for their friends is that Jesus is embracing the whole of mankind as his friends. Christianity has broadened its circle of inclusion. We have moved from the circle of Judaism in which only the circumcised are family, our kin, to all peoples, Jews and Gentiles alike, being part of our family. Christianity in theory is practising a universal outreach in which all are friends of Jesus and he lays down his life for each one of us.

This Remembrance Sunday, therefore, I would like to honour the dead by remembering their willingness to sacrifice their lives for the greater good. It is a peculiar Christian act which mirrors the single act of redemption and atonement made once for all by our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. In this sense, the professional soldier is a reflection of the soldier of Christ. So then, let us respect the men and women of our armed forces who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for our country, reflected in my text today: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

14th November, 2010

H: Sermon 22: Remembering

