

Remembrance Sunday 2009

Homily: Bishop Richard Moth, Bishop of the Forces

Westminster Cathedral

8 November 2009

Readings:

Wisdom 4:7-15

Romans 14:7-12

John 15:12-16

Only a few weeks ago, at St. Paul's Cathedral in the City of London, a service took place to mark the end of this country's military engagement in Iraq. Perhaps some of you here today were present. A point of focus for everyone at that event was the central plaque from the "Basra Memorial Wall" - a memorial built outside the Headquarters Multi-National Division South East in Basra by members of 37 Armoured Regiment Royal Engineers. Brass plaques on the wall listed the 178 service men and woman and one Ministry of Defence civilian who died during operations in Iraq. The wall was subsequently taken down and is being re-erected in the National Memorial Arboretum in this country. The central plaque, to which I have referred, is engraved with words from today's First Reading.

"Length of days is not what makes age honourable, nor number of years the true measure of life" as our Lectionary has it.

Indeed, the words of that Reading find a very clear echo in the words of Lawrence Binyon poem *For the Fallen* that will be quoted at every Remembrance Day Service that takes place in this land today. These words are as applicable today, 95 years after they were written – as are the words of the Book of Wisdom, written towards of the end of the Old Testament era.

The death of a loved one is never easy to bear – but when life is lost at a young age, far from home and family, it is all the more difficult to accept. Even though the cause for which the service man or woman died may be a just one, the suffering of family and friends is indeed great.

Hard though it may be, those words from the book of Wisdom point to a truth that is beyond ourselves – that the life experience and wisdom gained is more valuable than we can appreciate. A life well-lived does not depend on numbers of years and that can surely be a comfort for all those who experience loss, even though it is so hard for us to understand.

This year has seen the deaths of the last remaining veterans of the First World War: Henry Allingham and Harry Patch. These men, who, like so many other before and since, kept their experiences of war to themselves for many years, displayed a new form of bravery in their last years as they shared those experiences and their reflections on them with the latest generation.

The First World War – a war fought on an industrial scale – must surely have been unimaginably horrific. Even though time has mellowed the countryside around Ypres and the Somme, the innumerable war cemeteries provide a silent and peaceful witness to the sacrifice of so many young lives. Anyone, of any age, who visits the Western Front – or any other former battle zone – cannot leave unmoved.

The aspiration that the First World War would be the “War to end War” was not, of course, fulfilled. In the conflicts in the years since, wherever, they have taken place across the globe, have demanded further loss of life. Young men and women, at the behest of governments charged with making that most difficult of decisions to deploy Armed Services, have left family and friends and have made what is so often named “the ultimate sacrifice”. They have laid down their lives for others – for the sake of national security, for the safety of family and all they hold dear, for the friend in their ship’s company, platoon, regiment, squadron. Sometimes, the reasons for the sacrifice may not be so clear – but we remember today the willingness of those who have put their lives on the line and literally given all.

Today, surely, our minds must go to Afghanistan, where our Armed Services are again placed in harm’s way. Each day, it seems, more names are added to the list of those who have lost their lives. Information may come to us faster than ever before, but the way in which receive the news of casualties through radio, television and internet, is not a million miles away from that of the families who read casualty lists nearly a century ago. Once more, as Lawrence Binyon expressed it in the poem to which I have already referred, we “mourn our dead across the sea”.

St. Paul, in today’s second reading, reminds us that our life and death has an influence on others and relates the experience of life and death to the life and death of Christ. The truth at the centre of our Christian Faith – that the Word was made Flesh, dwelt among us, died and rose for us – speaks of a God who is not distant. We believe in a God who, in the person of the Son, is close to us in every aspect of human life, its joys and sorrow, its wonder and tragedy. That is not all – his resurrection from the dead points the way forward for us – the meaning for our existence is found in our life in Him. This the ultimate source of hope for us. It is hope for those who mourn, it is hope for those who are charged with leading us in society, it is hope for every member of our Armed Services, so much in our prayers this day, it is hope, too, for those who bear the scars of warfare and for those who care for them in either the medical services or as family members.

While it is only right that we remember today all who have died in armed conflict, I take this opportunity to call on all to think about those who live with the scars of warfare. They may carry physical wounds, some of which will take a long time to heal and require new acts of bravery in the exhausting work of rehabilitation. They may carry the burden that comes through not being able to speak about experiences, but that makes itself known through the flashback and the images that simply will not go away.

Let us remember, too, the families and friends who are asked to carry a new burden themselves – anxious waiting, fear of the worst possible news, support for a loved one who has, perhaps, an uncertain future and the demands of huge adjustment to a

new way of living. Is it not the case that the families of our service personnel are called, in their own way, to give their lives?

So many of us in this country, at every level of our society, have never known the ravages of war for ourselves. It is difficult – perhaps impossible for us to understand all that our service personnel and their families are experiencing at this time. For those of us in this position, I ask that there be an ever-growing awareness, in every place in society and in every home in this nation, of the needs of our service personnel and their families.

While there is no such thing as war without risk, those currently serving deserve all the necessary support and resources they need to fulfil the task they have been given in such a way that this risk is reduced as much as possible. Diplomatic solutions must continue to be sought, alongside the armed operation, so that a resolution can be brought about as speedily as possible. All those involved in such deliberations deserve our prayers, for the path to true justice is never an easy one.

May none of us gathered in this great Cathedral today forget that the greatest act of Remembrance we can make for those who have given their lives in war, the best witness and support we can give to those who bear the scars of conflict, either as service personnel or their families, is to strive for justice and truth – for justice and truth drive out fear and are the foundations for lasting peace.