

## **Address for the Receiving of the “Royal” Prefix Guards’ Chapel, Wellington Barracks**

*22 February 2019*

While the Army Chaplains Dept was formed in 1796, it was in 1919 that it received the “Royal” prefix. It is what we commemorate today. The courage and sacrifice of the padres in the Great War earned them this honour from King George V. Almost four and a half thousand chaplains were recruited in the First World War with 179 losing their lives on active service. Of those:

3 received the Victoria Cross  
67 The Distinguished Service Order  
449 The Military Cross

What bravery, commitment and faith these men must have had. Awe-inspiring examples of sacrificial love in their duty as good shepherds.

The Gospel reading chosen for today is that of the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. That sounds powerful. It sounds selfless. Dare I say, it may even sound pious. Think of the image for a moment. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Really!?

One might accept he would die for his wife, his children, but for a sheep? Wolves are circling. His own life is in danger. Yet he’d die for a sheep? Remove any sentiment in our reading and we’re left with a most incredible assertion from Our Lord.

Consider the gap between a man and a sheep. I know we might share a lot of DNA, but the gap is huge. Yet this is the image Jesus employs. Now think of the gap between God and man which is infinitely greater than that between a man and a sheep, yet God, in Christ, lays down his life for us. It is like trying to comprehend the size of the galaxy. It defeats us.

Nonetheless, God gives us glimpses of that truth, and it transforms us. It gives our life its proper perspective and orientation and calls us to serve Him. Clearly, the chaplains of the Great War must have felt this truth in their guts. It made them Good Shepherds in tending their flock, for some, even unto death.

What might we learn from them?

Since my appointment as Roman Catholic Bishop of the Forces I keep hearing about Woodbine Willie, (Rev Geoffrey Studdart Kennedy) a chaplain on the Western Front, who said “a chaplain’s ministry is a box of fags in your haversack, and a great deal of love in your heart. You can pray *with* the men sometimes; but pray *for* them always.

Looking at the current priorities of the RACHD I see there are 3 Ps to build up chaplains. Prayer is the first, being Positive the second and being Professional the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Let me say a word about each and what we can learn in order to become good shepherds:

1. Prayer: Take the time to pray. I am told the one unforgiveable sin of a chaplain is not saying his prayers. And not only praying but being seen to pray. Even if you aren’t religious, you want the padre to pray. That’s his job. Many may not practise their faith, but they instinctively understand the power of prayer.

A retired chaplain I spoke to told me how on deployment he perched each morning and evening on a Land Rover in the middle of the base to pray the Daily Office. Soldiers respected his time with God in prayer and would not disturb him. Only once did he say he was disturbed by a soldier, who having noticed he had been reading the same book morning and evening for some months asked, “how come you haven’t finished that book yet?”

Prayer doesn’t end. As Woodbine Willie says: “A chaplain should pray always.” Prayer is the well from which the chaplain draws life. The last thing needed in a chaplain is just another busy person with eyes fixed on the worries of the world. Thomas Merton said that in prayer we need to find the centre, the thing around which everything else revolves. That is where we must fix our eyes.

Prayer is also a time for honesty before God. Chaplains can carry the burdens of many, plus their own, so what do they do with them? Brave face? Best foot forward? Avoid accusations of *snowflakery*, in the current vernacular?

I once heard of a young hospital chaplain who had accompanied a family where the mother was dying of cancer. She eventually died leaving 4 children. The chaplain was so angered by this he was later found in the hospital chapel throwing hymn books at the crucifix. Asked whether Security should be called the senior chaplain replied, “leave him for a moment, he’s praying”.

Honesty before self and before God = Authentic prayer.

2. Being Positive. To a person of faith this is, of course, grounded in hope. A theological virtue where our lives are ordered towards heaven. It is a gift of grace, not a human characteristic or achievement. It pushes us beyond this world towards transcendent fulfilment. It is often confused with mere optimism, an upbeat assessment of current circumstances, regardless of the inevitable outcome. Hope is not wishful thinking about the circumstances of this world. In fact, from a worldly perspective the right attitude to life must surely be one of pessimism. After all, everyone dies. Our plans come to dust.

Today is the birthday of Arthur Schopenhauer. Born 22 February 1788, this German philosopher, arguably the most prominent pessimist in the entire western philosophical tradition, had this image for life: a man on a raft in swift rapids leading to a very high waterfall. With a stick in his hand he staves off the rocks using all his skill and energy to stay afloat. But then, finally, he goes over the waterfall to his death.

So, if this is all there is, the Pessimists have it.

But if it is all so pointless then Pessimists are simply unhappy fools.

Optimists on the other hand are happy fools.

But the hopeful are not foolish.

Their eyes and prayers are turned beyond this vale of tears to the truth of God's love and saving promise around which all else revolves.

3. Being Professional

Not to be mistaken for being "a" professional with a profession. A chaplain has a vocation. But that doesn't get him out of work.

Faith without **works** ... is dead

I remember Karl Malden as Fr Barry in *On the Waterfront* (Pope JPII's favourite film since it is about a priest becoming a good shepherd). Fr Barry attends the murder scene of Edie's brother, Joey, killed by dockyard mobsters: "If you need me, I'll be in the Church" he tells her. Bitingly she replies: "Was there ever a saint who hid in the Church?" A turning point in the film, and for Fr Barry.

But exactly what works we are drawn into needs careful attention.

Preoccupation with another 3 Ps of policy, politics and personalities and you can quickly lose your purpose.

As in all things, it's a question of balance.

Nurture and feed your prayer life, your sense of positive hope. Being professional helps us put all 3 theological virtues, faith hope and love, into practice in the world in which we live. It incarnates them. Structure, training, habit and common sense of purpose creates the right conditions for a vocation to grow and flourish.

And why all of this? Certainly not for the personal edification of the chaplain, but in order to serve, to shepherd, to offer hope and God's love to all soldiers, especially during times they feel they are hitting the rocks and heading towards a waterfall.

We rightly look to examples for inspiration in how to live the authentic Christian life of a good shepherd. I referred to four and a half thousand of them at the start. There have been many more since. But let me single out one today for special attention:

47 years ago today, 22 February, 1972, Fr Gerry Weston, a priest of the Archdiocese of Liverpool was killed by a car bomb in Aldershot, the last chaplain to be killed in active service.

Was he prayerful? He started every day with Mass and prayers for peace.  
Was he positive, a man of hope? He was continually going into Catholic estates in Ballymurphy to build bridges between the community and the soldiers, often at great risk to himself.

Was he professional? He was trained as both a priest and as a military chaplain, bringing these worlds together to make him a very good shepherd.

On this centenary of the "Royal" prefix, let us pray for the repose of the souls of all Army chaplains who have died and pray for all those currently in service, that they will centre their lives on prayer, receive the gift of hope to inspire a positive ministry and work to engage professionally in today's Army in the service of God, Queen and country.