

Sunday 8 November 2020

Catching the torch

Today will be a very different Remembrance Day from those we have seen in past years. No standing in the memorial garden with the village community and the uniformed organisations watching wreaths being laid. No march past the cenotaph. And for some that will be a great sadness. This has been another major anniversary year; 75 years since VE Day and then VJ day. Earlier in the summer there were programmes showing us the celebrations across the country as the Second World war came to an end.

For some of us, a diminishing number of course they brought back real memories; they were there. For others we have perhaps heard stories from family and friends though not all wanted to remember what they had experienced. My Dad was in Burma and my Mum was in the Queen Alexandra Nursing Corps but neither said much about those times. For many the world wars are now history to be learnt about but not something that brings an emotional connection.

In these times of national crisis because of the pandemic, there have been many references to the national spirit that helped us overcome the hardships of war and should help us fight the current enemy. Indeed the Royal British Legion in their literature for this year remind us that many of the feelings, emotions, and challenges faced by the Second World War generation, while different in their causes and extent, have echoes for many today; shortages of goods, feeling socially isolated, familial dislocation, a sense of the unknown, a feeling of being forgotten, and the collaboration of nations and communities to face a common foe.

So how should we remember today?

Of course, it is good to simply give time to honour those who gave their lives to bring us peace; generations of young men with their lives before them who were called and went, many enduring unimaginable horrors. Later, in silence, we will indeed remember them.

But shouldn't remembrance do more than that? I read again last week the famous First World War poem by John McCrae "In Flanders Fields" which helped to popularise the poppy as a symbol of remembrance. It is of course a very emotional poem but it was the last part that particularly struck me:

Take up our quarrel with the foe;
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high,
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders' Fields.

He presents this challenge to subsequent generations to hold high the torch, not to break faith with those who did their part as best they could. And doesn't that thought give remembrance a much richer meaning? For each of us, also, has the opportunity to stand up for the things that matter and which make a difference to our own worlds, however large or small we think that contribution to be. And in doing so we can keep faith with those who have gone before; we can catch the torch and keep it shining brightly.

And that of course is a very Christian principle. Jesus enjoins us not to hide our lights under a lampstand; Paul tells us in Philippians that we should shine like stars in the universe as we hold out the word of life.....and in Ephesians 5:8-10 he says this (JBP):

"Once you were darkness but now as Christians you are light. Live then as children of light. The light produces in men and women all that is good and right and true. Let your lives be living proofs of the things which please God."

There is a key truth there. If we are to shine as lights in the world, if we are to be effective in our witness to those around us, if we are to be filled with God's love light, we need to allow God's light to irradiate our own lives. Of ourselves we have no light to give. Jesus, who is the light of the world, comes to live in us by his Holy Spirit to form in us the light of Christ.

So how are you and I shining today? Is the torch blazing well?

I think it is easy for me especially in these strange times to get discouraged; perseverance can be hard for all of us. We can get tired; I am sure we all have covid fatigue, and however useful it is and however grateful we are, we also probably have zoom fatigue. The danger perhaps is that sometimes we develop goodness fatigue. Paul tells the Galatians not to grow weary in doing good for in the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Just as soldiers received the call to war and answered it, so we too are called by God; our call is to live wholeheartedly for him; to go deeper in our relationship with him; to make pleasing him our first priority, so that his light can shine in us and people can be pointed to Jesus.

And that will never be easy. Dallas Willard warns us that we live in an age of superficiality and, he says, that effects the church too: we can be satisfied with where we are as Christians and go through the religious motions rather than seek God afresh day by day. The passage we read this morning from Ephesians 6 gives us another perspective on that. It tells us that our calling is being lived out in a war zone. With this pandemic, we may have felt the reality of that more closely, but at all times we are all involved in a spiritual battle and there is nothing that the devil, the forces of evil would like better than to see the lights of the church grow dim or even be extinguished. So, no wonder if we find seeking God difficult; there is opposition and we need to be prepared for the fight.

We don't have time this morning for a full discussion of this familiar passage, but let's touch on a few key points:

This is a battle where we are on the winning side. I guess in both world wars there were times when people doubted victory, when things looked pretty bleak. In our lives there will also be times of discouragement; perhaps when we know we have fallen away from God, know that our relationship with him is not where it once was, our prayer life is non-existent. Don't we all have those times or is it just me?

So let's take to heart verse 10 be strong not in yourselves but in the Lord, in the power of his boundless strength. The great preacher Charles Simeon comments on this verse:

"Well does the apostle speak of Christ's mighty power for indeed he is Almighty. He has all power committed to Him in heaven and on earth: the most inveterate diseases vanished at His touch, at His mere word; the devils themselves yielded to His authority and were instantly forced to liberate their captives at His command; the very elements, wind and wave were obedient to His word. What then can He not do for those who trust in Him."

We have a general in this battle like no other.

And then we are to put on God's complete armour. Is our mind confused, pulled in many directions, exposed to temptation, we have a helmet of salvation to guard it. Are we experiencing fear, distress, sorrow, we have the breast-plate of righteousness to protect our hearts. Might our feet cause us to fall, there are shoes for their protection. Is our armour likely to come loose, there is a belt of truth to keep it tight. Are there gaps where a well-aimed dart might get through, we have a shield of faith to deflect whatever comes our way.

The point is that God provides all we need to live a Godly life; we don't have the strength in ourselves. We must not think that we can cope in this battle with just a bit of help from God when we are struggling. We need God's protection all the time. I'm not a student of war, but of course enemy attacks would be planned when the other side was felt to be least prepared. The attacks of the Devil are no different; he is intent to lead us into sin and to lead us away from God. If you haven't already done so read CS Lewis Screwtape Letters (old now, written around the time of the Second world war but giving fascinating insights into what Paul calls the devil's wiles.) So, let's take the threat seriously and come to God daily acknowledging our weakness and asking for his strength.

The armour we have talked about is for protection, but the passage also talks about us taking the offensive; winning the argument with Satan. We do it with the sword of the Spirit which

is the word of God. Let's be honest with ourselves this morning about how well we know our Bible; how often we read it; does it have a priority place in our lives? If not, why not and do we want to do something about it? We tend to find time for the things that are important, don't we? If Jesus demonstrated the importance of God's word in confronting temptation and showing God's power, how can we think we can get away with dipping in and out from time to time or waiting for the Sunday sermon?

And then we are told to pray; pray at all times with every kind of spiritual prayer, keeping alert and persistent as you pray for all Christ's men and women. Paul is saying prayer is our constant, its foundational. It is the key way we go deeper with God, worshipping him, listening to him and asking for his help. Perhaps a military picture might be of the supply chain. An army can't go faster than the supplies it needs to keep its people and equipment going. Our knowledge and relationship with God can't grow faster than the time we spend in his presence.

So then, if we want those torches to blaze, our lights to shine brightly for the sake of the world around us, we need to stand assured of God's boundless strength; we need to put on all the armour each day; we need to get serious about our knowledge of the bible and about our prayer lives. Just as we have been urged with covid to get into good habits like washing our hands, let's continue to build good habits of coming to God and seeking him regularly

As Christians the torch we carry should shine with the light of Christ. As we remember the fallen today, let's also remember our Lord Jesus who died for each one of us out of his great love. Let's remember that Christ came to give us life in all its fulness. And let us pledge ourselves to going deeper with Him, fighting daily the battle of faith because, of course, it is the battle most worth winning.