

## St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Sermon for Choral Evensong 26 April 2015

Micah 4.1-4 Psalm 46 John 15.9-17

It has not been easy to decide how to speak with you this evening about the first world war. In the past it seems, clergy found it easy. They made confident statements about the value, the necessity, the alleged glory of sending the finest youth to war as some kind of purification or holy rite for young men. In the tragic Erastian<sup>1</sup> tradition of simply acquiescing with the state, the Church of England newspaper in Melbourne declared the war due in part to the influence of the German theologian Martin Luther, who lacked 'Christian meekness' and had set his nation on an aggressive path centuries before.

Christian enthusiasm for the war continued after the retreat at Gallipoli. It did not abate even after the number of casualties in France began to be known. Anglicans weren't lone voices either. In June 1915 the *Australian Baptist* newspaper had an editorial encouraging the physically fit 'to present themselves, a willing sacrifice on the altar of their Empire's needs'.

British clergy seem to have been even more enthusiastic about war than Australians. The Anglican Bishop of London, Arthur F. Winnington-Ingram, preached a sermon in 1915 urging the British to 'kill Germans – do kill them; not for the sake of killing, but to save the world, to kill the good as well as the bad, to kill the young as well as the old, to kill those who have shown kindness to our wounded as well as those fiends'.<sup>2</sup> The current Bishop of London, The Rt Revd and Rt Honourable Richard Chartres spoke very differently in the House of Lords last year when he said,

as we navigate now into a new multipolar world, as the period of unchallengeable Western hegemony passes into history, our commemoration

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<sup>1</sup> Erastianism is the contested belief that the state should have control of the Church in all matters. At times the established Church of England has been compliant with this and Anglican ethos can be disposed towards it.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Foley Winnington-Ingram KCVO PC (1858 – 1946) was Bishop of London from 1901 to 1939. During World War I Winnington-Ingram threw himself into supporting the war effort. He saw the war as a 'great crusade to defend the weak against the strong' and accepted uncritically stories of German atrocities. For a clergyman the language he used about the German people verged on xenophobia and H. H. Asquith, Prime Minister at the outbreak of the war, described his pitch as "jingoism of the shallowest kind." He spoke in aid of recruiting drives and later in the war urged his younger clergy to consider enlisting as combatants. Chaplain from 1901 to the London Rifle Brigade and London Royal Naval Volunteers, he visited the troops on both the Western Front and at Salonika and the Grand Fleet at Rosyth and Scapa Flow. For his war work he was Mentioned in Despatches and awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of the Redeemer (Greece) and the Order of St. Sava, 1st Class (Serbia).  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur\\_Winnington-Ingram](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Winnington-Ingram)

has to stimulate the deep reflection that we shall need if we are to avoid the mistakes of the past. <sup>3</sup>

I believe we should be very, very careful what we say about these past events. We see them differently now, one hundred years later. We are willing to question, to count the costliness, to name the grief and loss that lingered in too many homes and hearts after 1918. Yes, we want to remember the men and women who did what they believed was the right thing, their duty, and who were courageous and loyal to one another in the face of terrible suffering and trauma. We rightly honour those who use force only according to law and only because they believe it is the last resort that will create the breathing space to build a better moral order for the future. The Christian faith does not require us to be totally pacifist, though some will hold that position, but nor is it licence not to pray and strive to be among the peacemakers.

We know the first world war had a huge impact in the streets and neighbourhood we now inhabit. Honour boards like ours, memorial chapels like ours with its copy of the painting "The Great Sacrifice", the memorial windows, all speak of losses almost beyond the bearing but for the making of such places of remembrance. Places like these speak of the search for meaning and purpose in what many feared had too little, if truth be told. Truth, of course, being the first casualty of war and meaning and purpose its most elusive remnants.

What would they say to us if they could speak, those battalions of the departed, whose families lived around her and laboured under their loss until they too were carried to their graves? Would they speak as once some clergy did? Or would they urge us to heed the calls for peace. They might actually contradict the voices that they say our national identity was forged at Gallipoli and call us back to 1901 and Federation, the vote and the right to stand for election- for women as well as men (full enfranchisement; a world first!); the eight hour day and the basic wage, the social compact that, yes, had its flaws and unjust exclusions but is a more fitting foundation for our identity than warfare.

The prophet Micah lived in violent times but he longed for it not to be so. When his people were beyond warning that their security did not lie in political alliances with other nations, nor in retaliation, he set before them a vision of shalom, wellbeing, of every one living peacefully, unafraid. Swords become ploughs to produce food in abundance, spear become pruning hooks for vines to produce the wines that gladden the heart.

Idealistic? You bet! Naïve? It can seem so. Beyond our human doing? Yes of course - except for this. One, just One of us, Jesus, now the risen Christ has lived free of the scapegoating of an enemy to which we humans so readily become enthralled. And

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.london.anglican.org/articles/first-world-war-motion/> The Bishop of London speaking on 25 June 2014 in the House of Lords on the Motion to Take Note, moved by Lord Gardiner of Kimble: That this House takes note of the programme to commemorate the centenary of the First World War.

Jesus Christ alone enables us to follow his way even into death. Yes, there may be a time when forceful opposition to injustice is necessary as a last resort. We must live in the world as it is; but we must not *willingly* be part of its sources of violence.

Every nation in world war 1 asserted that God was on their side. But the God of the scriptures is on the side of just relationships, of reconciliation between those opposed to one another, of acting only towards a neighbour as we would want them to act toward us. During world war 1 few voices spoke like this; spoke for negotiation, spoke for peace but they too showed courage and paid a high price.

For us, especially for we Anglicans, there may be a costly sacrifice – the letting go of the unexamined rhetoric of the state and the recovery, the advocacy of the nonviolent response of Jesus in the face of hatred, envy and violence. No one has greater love for another than to lay down their life for them, as Jesus himself did rather than betray his humanity and his integrity. For us, a hundred years after Gallipoli, that love may be better shown in bearing the fruits of peace in generosity towards neighbours in need and even enemies.

Yesterday a friend posted these words on his Facebook page:

The work of memory is not in the minute's silence, for that is no more and no less than the time to recall and renew the need to remember. The work of memory is in the sacrifice of how we choose to spend our lives, and it is there and only there that the true nature of our remembering will be revealed.

We do not honour the costly commitment of those whose names and stories we are recorded here when we let legend overshadow sound thinking about these serious things. We honour them when we bring them to life, tell their stories and mourn their loss to our whole society, and learn from the past so that *we* shape a different future.

We cannot change the past, but we are responsible for how we remember it, which resonances we highlight, which we critique. By maintaining St Martin's Chapel, by restoring the painting which was the primary interpretive lens of a generation, and by praying as we do in that place of morning prayer each day for a just and peaceful world, we honour the memory of those whose names are in the chapel, who lived in the streets nearby or sat in the pews where you are this evening.

Above all else we honour them if we choose the ways of peace now.

Colleen O'Reilly  
Vicar