

Sermon for Remembrance Sunday 9th November 2014

Like many of you here this morning I went this week to see the installation of ceramic poppies in the moat of the Tower of London. The work is called "Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red". There is a poppy to represent each of the 888,246 British and Commonwealth soldiers who lost their lives in the First World War. It is deeply moving and impressive. At first all you see is the great tide of red lapping the walls of the Tower. Then, as you get closer, you start to see not a uniform mass but movement and variation in the placing of the poppies. Then, closer still, you see that each poppy has been carefully and beautifully made. Each dark red petal, each blackened centre. And each poppy was placed by hand in the positions we see them. A labour of love as well as art.

What struck me as much as the poppies themselves was the other tide visible from Tower Hill. The vast tide of quiet watching people who had come to do what? To see a spectacle, a sight, or to pay respects, to say thank you to the fallen represented by each and every poppy? I imagine like me many had not given much thought beforehand to how we would feel when we got there. What seemed to happen, to me at least and to those there this Thursday around me, was a kind of quieting, a kind of humbling. The immensity of it all. The way it seemed to go on and on. The way that the deeper you looked into it the vaster the experience became. The connection finally of the paper poppies I had pinned onto my coat year after year, with what they actually stood for and meant.

For the meaning was stark and not hard to read. From a distance the moat of poppies looked just one amorphous mass of red. Close up each poppy was a separate and beautiful single stem. From a distance the events of the First World War can seem one senseless waste. Close up it is each so beloved husband, father, brother and son. In this country the remembering of individuals by name is a central part of how we commemorate both the First and Second World Wars. The poppies represent not just lives lost but lives lived. A life not just a death.

In this parish along with many in this centenary year there is a project to take some of the names on our war memorial and find out a little more of their own individual stories. To give life to the names we read faithfully each year in our Remembrance services. I am grateful to Margaret Joachim who is coordinating the project and to Christine Bates who has begun some of this research for sending me details of one such name for this morning: Nigel Jocelin Searancke Huntington, Second Lieutenant, Lincolnshire Regiment was born 12th June 1892. Christine has found details of his parents, Alice and Herbert, and siblings and early life from census records and school rolls. No clear connection with St Peter's or Ealing has been found but he has become more than just a name. We can remember today that a hundred years ago last Thursday Nigel's battalion landed at Le Havre, and moved into positions near Festubert. And a hundred years ago on the Monday after next, 17th November 1914 Nigel was killed in action at the age of 22 and is commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial, Richebourg L'Avoue, France.

One of the poppies in the Tower moat. But so much more than just one poppy in the moat. All the things a young man of 22 also was and might have been. I live in a house with a young man and a young woman of 22 and the appalling thought of what would be lost is beyond words. What do we do with all this? Where do we stand in relation to all this?

Our readings today offer a different perspective on things. They offer not the perspective of a hundred years but of eternity. Lives touched not only by the tides of history but by God. Two of our readings, one from the book of the Wisdom of Solomon and our gospel reading from St Matthew seem at first glance rather remote from the feelings and focus of today's service. They along with our reading from St. Paul's letter to the young church at Thessalonica, do not deal with looking back but looking forward. Looking beyond where we have been and where we are now, or rather looking properly at where we are standing.

In our readings today we are commended to seek Wisdom in the path we travel through life, to be patient and faithful in our journey. To not waste our lives on vain and empty pursuits but to dedicate ourselves to building Christ's kingdom. In this journey we are not to fear even death itself as in Christ we shall know no

barrier between the living and the dead. In the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids we are charged to "Keep Awake". To not be stunned or paralysed by the things of the past. Neither by national or by, rawer, personal losses.

The Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, as well as a great many gravestones across France and Belgium, are expressions of the simple truth that many are known only to God. As indeed is each of us here, each of us throughout the history of our poor bloodstained and war-torn world. We cannot attempt to make sense of the losses of the past. We struggle desperately to comprehend the losses we have felt most keenly ourselves. Known only to God covers so much of our lives. The things we have felt and said and done. The hurts, the hopes, the joys and the tears. The things too deep for words. The sadness that would fill a moat, the happiness that takes us to the skies. To "Keep Awake" is to allow ourselves to be known, to be open to all life offers and to be alive to the needs and pains of others.

We cannot know every name, we cannot mourn every story but we can live lives that allow other lives their meaning and wholeness. A spiritual insight that has given comfort to many over the years is the saying that in God: "All in the end is harvest." This is not a glib or sugared response to the suffering of the world, but a reflection on those things known only to God. To know that nothing in Christ is ever wasted. We know this because Jesus tells us that not only are our lives known to him but every hair on our heads is counted. He who sees the sparrow fall is not indifferent to our fallings and our pain. He asks us to consider the lilies of the field, Palestine poppies, and as we look on their frailty to know his promise that all things are in his hands.

To return to Tower Hill and its moat of poppies and that other tide. All of the people looking on. It is right and proper to want to honour what was lost. It is right and proper to remember as we are about to in this service today. But it is vital that having looked back we find the courage to look within ourselves and out towards our world. To keep awake to what God is calling us to do and to be today. To find ourselves truly known. To commit to God's safe keeping the things that only he can hold. From the lilies of the field to the harvest of our lives.

Amen

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