

## **Remembrance Service 2008 (Rainford)**

### ***The Words of Jesus***

Today we are remembering, seeking to give thanks for the sacrifice of those who gave their lives in the wars of the past and the present. We are also praying for peace; recognising that when all is said and done, war represents human failure; a failure of relationships, ultimately a failure to obey the second commandment God gave to Moses thousands of years ago: *to love your neighbour as yourself*.

There are some words of our Lord Jesus Christ from today's second reading that I always find extremely powerful on Remembrance Sunday. This is John 15.12,13:

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*

Jesus spoke those words originally to his disciples. Originally, his message was especially for them, his closest followers, to love and honour each other to the point of counting the other's life worth sacrificing your own. Jesus is talking about love in the least sentimental way possible, but in the most practical and costly. Quite possibly, Jesus was pointing to his own imminent sacrifice and death on the cross of Calvary. There, his life would be given as an act of love and obedience to God the Father; and for the salvation of the whole world. Jesus himself would fulfil those words: *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*.

### ***As an example***

So Jesus own sacrificial death is held up before us as the greatest act of love there has ever been, and a kind of example against which we can try to understand the death of so many that we remember today; for they too, willingly or unwillingly, with or without understanding, were laying down their lives for their friends. Many of them will have done so in fear and trembling, completely unaware of any noble motive or of the supreme example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### ***Two things in tension***

So we have to hold two truths together in our minds: first, that war is a symptom of human failure; second, that *greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*. Sometimes, it is difficult to hold those two truths together. For example, if you take the view that war is the greatest evil there is, there can never then be a justification for it, and the logical thing to do is to become a pacifist. On the other hand, if you so get into the idea of a death in war as a noble ideal, then you end up glorifying it as an end in itself. Perhaps you know these words of the poet Rupert Brooke from the First World War: *Dulci et decorum est pro patria mori*. It is a good and noble thing to die for one's country. Taken on their own, those words would seem to glorify death in war for its own sake, never mind the reasons why. I find that I cannot agree with Rupert Brooke's words.

But I am not a pacifist either, though I respect those who take that view, for I know where they are coming from. The reason I am not a pacifist is that I do not believe that war is the

greatest evil there is; and that therefore war is justifiable as a last resort against a greater evil. But it must be that *last resort*.

Well, we could go on and on thinking about this. But whatever the rights or wrongs of it all, we come today to remember with thanksgiving those who laid down their lives in war, in some way reflecting those words of Jesus: *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*.

As time passes, the events of the two great wars of the last century become more and more remote from our experience. We need to re-enter the message of Remembrance Sunday, try to identify with those men and women who made the supreme sacrifice. How easy it is even to put out of our minds the ongoing conflicts that our armed forces are involved in; and we must pray for them too.

### ***Omaha Beach***

When my children were young we went with another family on holiday to Normandy. We were staying just a few miles inland. One warm day we took them for a swim off a wide sandy beach. They had great fun swimming and playing, and exploring some big holes in the dunes and cliffs behind the beach, where there were broken and twisted bits of concrete and cast iron. The children wanted to know what they were, so I explained to them that on this very same beach in 1944 many thousands of men had died on D-day in the first stage of the liberation of France.

Later on, I took them up to the military cemetery above the beach. The children complained and protested all the way. Until, that is, we began to walk around the cemetery with its eleven thousand graves, immaculately kept white gravestones, crosses, stars of David, even the occasional Islamic crescent, many with single roses or flowers laid by them, even after all these years. It is the same cemetery above Omaha beach that you may have seen in the opening scenes of that remarkable film *Saving Private Ryan*. The children fell silent and walking around for nearly an hour, completely absorbed in the atmosphere of the place. I did not have to say anything. They got the message, in that utterly powerful place.

### ***Conclusion***

Today, we remember the sacrifice of the dead in war with thanksgiving. We pledge ourselves again to strive for peace. And we contemplate the tragedy of it all, and try to get the message once again: *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*.

And for yourself, in the present, how might you express that 'greater love' that Jesus Christ sets before us?