

*Remembrance Sunday*

The death toll of British soldiers in Afghanistan has been rising steadily. And behind these grim statistics are others, less visible, more easily overlooked; those who are physically and emotionally injured, who will never work again, never walk again, never talk again, never laugh again. A high cost to pay.

We are here today to remember. To remember those who have borne for us the cost of war, particularly those who have given their lives.

In 1914 young men, many still children, were ready to lie about their age to fight for their country. Those who survived until 1918 were changed by their experiences for ever.

They had seen in the mud of Passchendaele, of Ypres, of the Somme, the terrible effects of shrapnel, of gas, of disease. And they returned to a land that was in mourning, and where, over time, it came to be accepted that many of the battles in which their brothers and friends had lost their lives, had achieved next to nothing.

The need to remember was strong, to honour those who had set out with such high ideals and such bravery.

Today our experience of war is different. Those who return from war in 2009 come back to a country that seems hardly even to notice that they have gone. The cost has not been equally shared out; for all the immediacy of instant war reportage, we are not engaged, we are spectators.

We have forgotten. And we need to remember.

We need to remember the cost of war. So many women after the 14 – 18 war never married or bore children – how could they? So many young men had died. Countless others brought up their children alone. Countless men failed ever to recover from what they had heard and seen. The cost was huge and borne by everyone.

After the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of civilians mourned those who had died not just on the battlefield but in the bombing of London, of Dresden, of Nagasaki, and in the gas chambers and the Prisoner of War camps.

Today, service men and women and their families are bearing the cost of war on our behalf. And of course, our calculations tend to be one sided. As in every war, particularly of the modern age, civilians die in unacceptably large numbers.

We must always remember the cost of war. It must weigh heavily upon us and upon our leaders, guiding us always to seek out alternatives to armed conflict; where there is none, we must take with the utmost seriousness our responsibility for protecting life and our need for penitence when our best efforts are inevitably not good enough.

But it is not just the *cost* that we should be remembering here today. We must also remember that very ordinary people – people just like us – are capable of acts of very extraordinary self-sacrifice and bravery. In every war, there have been -- and there still are – those who risk their lives not for personal glory, not for hope of reward on earth or in heaven, not even for a political principal, but simply out of care for others.

Today we remember the power of love to be made manifest in even the most dreadful of environments.

But there is yet one more thing to remember on this Remembrance Day, perhaps the most important thing to remember of all.

Our God is not God of the dead but of the living. If we could see as God sees, we would see the great span of time from beginning to end, with each one of us along that line the focus of God's special care and attention. We would see the women and children huddled in fear as they watch the huts in the village burn as the Viking raiders coming closer. We would see the disbelief of the father whose son was turned to vapour in Hiroshima. And we would feel the pain of the world as God feels it. But we would also see the warrior overcome with compassion who spares the child's life, the soldier who runs out into the line of fire to rescue a friend, the man who at great personal risk opens his home to Jewish refugees.

We would see just how hard love works to overcome evil.

The people of our past, our present, our future, are all with God, for all time is present to him. God is not God of the dead but of the living.

Those who grieved on Armistice Day in 1918 wanted to know that those whom they had loved and lost were safe in God's care. It is this hope that is embodied in the Christian faith and that gives our remembering today a particular edge of hope and wonder. People suffer and die in war. How vital to remember that through grace, though we done nothing to deserve it, God is with us to the end of time.

Remembrance is one of the things, perhaps *the* thing, which makes us who we are.

Some remembering is mundane; we must remember to turn off the gas before we go out or the house may catch fire.

Some remembering goes to the heart of our human relationships. We must remember our mother's birthday, because we love her.

And on Remembrance Sunday we must remember the fallen, because if we ever forget the cost of conflict, or the power of self-sacrificing love we will lose our humanity.

We must remember, and allow God, who is always with us, to teach us the way of love.

Amen.