

World War I Centenary Act of Remembrance – St Edmundsbury Cathedral
November 7th 2018

Sermon preached by the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich
The Rt Revd Martin Seeley

I, that on my familiar hill
Saw with uncomprehending eyes
A hundred of thy sunsets spill
Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice,
Ere the sun swings his noonday sword
Must say good-bye to all of this;-
By all delights that I shall miss,
Help me to die, O Lord.¹

These words which we have just heard sung, were written by William Noel Hodgson, 23 years old, a young officer in the Devonshires, and published at the end of June 1916. He was killed a few days later on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, July 1. “Must say good-bye to all of this; - By all delights that I shall miss, Help me to die, O Lord.” Prescient words.

The same poem was read by Prince Harry on June 30th 2016 at Thiepval, marking the centenary of the Battle of the Somme.

His father wrote to Noel’s sister four years later, in 1920, “Our visit to the Devonshire Cemetery was all we could wish: we had little difficulty finding it: and we spent four hours there...The grave plots are in two rows; about 8 or 9 lie in each plot: and a wooden cross in the centre has their names punched on tin tape – our Boy lies with one fellow officer and eight private soldiers...he lies with his own comrades around him, in this tiny close at the top of a hill,

¹ The final stanza of “Before Action”

“looking out” over vast open land, where the great winds blow! and in the very heart of the land for whose deliverance they all contended to the death.”

Noel’s father, Henry, was the first Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, and he himself is buried in front of the high altar here in this Cathedral, looking out over very different terrain. I am grateful to my predecessor, Bishop Nigel for pointing out this connection. So this place will forever be connected to Noel Hodgson, as to so many who gave their lives in the horror of battle, or succumbed to injury or illness, in the course of the First World War. We remember here in this place soldiers, sailors and airmen, medical and support personnel and civilians caught up in the conflict.

I spent a Saturday afternoon a couple of weeks ago quietly at the cenotaph in Ipswich reading the names of the citizens of the Borough of Ipswich, row upon row upon row of names. And that makes up just a small fraction of the 750,000 of the British military personnel who lost their lives, itself a fraction of the more than 10 million military and 8 million civilian deaths worldwide.

We are a century on, a century of huge upheaval, conflict, and appalling acts of inhumanity aided by advances in technology that distance the perpetrators from the victims, where enemies are dots on screens, not screams from a few yards away. We live in a time when forces seem arrayed to continue on this treacherous path, and so we reach back over the decades to the years of the Great War and the connections seem to remake themselves for us in an instant. The images of the trenches, the cries of the injured, the whistling of the bullets, films and plays and poems, our own visits to the battlefields, and the stories of loved ones handed down, bring this all back.

We are seeing the connections remade all across our country and our county. School projects researching the stories of those who fought and died in the Great War. Churches and community centres commemorating their own fallen, not just as a name, but as a person who lived in this village or that town, whose descendants are known. We welcome here today Daniel Saunders, who so movingly read the, and Christopher Hodgson, Noel's great nephew. These human connections, the stories, the reality of all that was borne by this nation and all the nations involved, this must never be forgotten and nor will it be.

Just in the past week I have seen these connections being made, for example, in the tiny fifteenth century Row Chapel in Hadleigh where the poppy-covered chapel includes a commemoration of Private Ophir Jarvis, who died from wounds sustained at the Somme and whose grandson is a member of the chapel's congregation.

Or connections represented at a confirmation last Sunday at a packed church, St Mary's Combs, where two of the seats were taken by perspex silhouettes of soldiers, just as they are here tonight.

And I will never forget the first time three years ago that I walked into Framlingham College chapel, to be met by the testimonials to not one, nor two, but three members of the college awarded the Victoria Cross from the Great War and its aftermath – including one, to Captain Flowerdue, awarded posthumously for leading a cavalry charge at Bois de Mureuil in March 1918 that some regarded as a turning point in the war. The college lost 137 pupils and staff in the war, including 14 on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

Villages and towns across Suffolk have devised their own memorials to make their own connections, and at the extraordinary Crimson Glory performance here in the Cathedral last Sunday night, someone reminded me that no one told anyone to produce these acts of remembrance. People just did. And so we have acres of rigging festooned with knitted, crocheted, and fabric poppies from Walton to Walsham le Willows.

And doubtless many of us have done our own research, or reminded ourselves of our own family stories, connecting again. For my son's school project we had to produce names of family members who died in the Great War, and of course in our case that meant German relatives as well as English.

Why have we all participated in this, in these acts of remembering, of re-connecting with this time a century ago? Not for glory, though certainly for courage, sacrifice and endurance beyond what most of us have experienced. Not for despair, though the war did not end all wars, and the despair of countless individuals traumatised by battle or by the loss of loved ones is incalculable. There are too many examples of parents dying heartbroken within just a few years of their children being killed in battle. Bishop Hodgson himself died within the year of visiting his son's grave.

I believe what we find underneath these connections has led us to make them. It is not just about the connections with the stories, with family, with our village's history, but connections with something deep inside us about hope and the future.

We live in an age where for many the future is fragile, uncertain, precarious. We don't look forwards with ease. Our children wonder what the world will be like.

So we have reached back to a time when the future was barely as far as the next day, or the next hour, to a time far enough away now that it has become almost bearable to look at and not reel in utter horror, and we reach back because it is here we uncover hope. Not optimism, which is wishful thinking, but hope which is about our reality.

And the grounds for our hope are the qualities revealed in connections, in the stories, from the Great War, the qualities of courage, of sacrifice, of endurance, of comradeship, and of cooperation, of communities coming together. And even in the mythologised account of the 1914 Christmas Day Truce, really a fragmentary scattered observance, nevertheless, we see the instinct to connect as human beings across the divides that have been imposed.

There is something of human goodness in the midst of all this. And this is what we have reconnected with. Goodness in the face of horror and evil, in the face of fear and death and incredible suffering. But goodness nevertheless, and human goodness that recognises the goodness of another human being, friend and even foe. Acts of kindness, acts of heroism for the sake of a chum, acts of generosity for those fighting far away, even acts of reconciliation. Echoing the words in our second reading from Scripture, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

We see the horror, and see human beings and communities rising up again from it. Not right away, we know. The distress and the anguish, and the resentment immediately after the Great War was strong. But after a time, we remember what happened, with the resolve that it never happen again. And while it does happen again, and again, and will happen again and again, we nevertheless reach back to make connections not just to people, to stories, to memories, but to the God-redeemed reality of what it is to be truly human, to that deep goodness that still rises up in the ghastly mud and blood sodden chaos of the Great War, goodness that tastes of the eternal, that endures whatever the world holds, that bears the hope that love ultimately prevails; goodness calling us, in the words of our first reading, to live “To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”.

It is the reality of a God who reveals that out of death, out of the appalling death borne by him in his Son, out of death comes resurrection, and despite that appalling death, this God walks with us and will walk with us and bear us up through whatever we face. And this God builds in us, as in those who bore the heat of battle, builds in us those gifts, those same qualities – of courage, of sacrifice, of endurance, of comradeship, of cooperation, of goodness – qualities that bear us through war and suffering, and which are the same qualities that enable us to build peace.

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