

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Canon Philip Banks
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday 11 November 2018: Remembrance Sunday
Texts: *Jonah 3.1-5,10; Hebrews 9.24-end; Mark 1.14-20*

Remembrance should wake us up

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.

Many of us were here on Wednesday at the magnificent *Eve of Peace* WWI Centenary Commemoration service. We heard these words then, set to a new musical composition and performed for the first time – the winning entry by David Fawcett of our Cathedral composition competition, funded by the Vestey Trust. The words are printed in your weekly bulletin, and you'll hear them again today as the communion anthem.

The words were written by Noel Hodgson, son of the first Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich: he was 23 years old, a young officer in the Devonshires. The poem was 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."

Bishop Martin, when he was here at the service on Wednesday, quoted in his sermon from the letter which his predecessor wrote to his daughter, Noel's sister, four years later, in 1920. Bishop Martin gave me the letter to read to you again, to connect with that poignant service:

"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, "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, our first Bishop here for Suffolk, is buried under the floor in front of the high altar: a rather different resting place, as Bishop Martin said on Wednesday, from his son's.

You'll know that I've been closely involved in the planning of last week's service and of *Crimson Glory*: planning which stretched back well over a year – I've been part of a county-wide planning group led by Lady Clare, our Lord Lieutenant.

Two things have really struck me in this last year of commemoration.

First, is the way in which this centenary has been marked in so many places and in so many ways: For example...

- School projects: last Thursday, through the work of that group and the RBL, almost every churchyard, cemetery, burial ground with a war grave – was attended by school children: laying poppies, hearing local stories, praying prayers.
- Churches and Community Centres have been festooned with poppies in one way or another.
- Perspex silhouettes like the ones here, are scattered across the country in public buildings, churches, cathedrals, community centres, reminding us of the missing. And our very own life-sized one created by Martin Hooker, good friend to the cathedral and former RAF Regimental Secretary.

What I've found really remarkable is that nobody has told us to do this. No instruction has come to us from on high, 'you must do this'. Rather each community or group has just got on with it, inspired to mark this unique moment in our history.

The second thing which has struck me is listening again to the poet Sean O'Brien reflecting on our history here and across Europe: how it is that we seem to be shaped by such a complex narrative:

So successful – yet so catastrophic.

So generative of ideas, culture, art – yet so destructive. You may recall back in Lent when I quoted him talking of the forests of Lithuania and their famous mushroom harvests being so good... because so many dead bodies are buried there as a result of the atrocities of war – and are

right next to wonderful medieval towns with medieval art, music, success. He writes of how we seem to be able to create extraordinary beauty and culture, and yet at the same time to consume and destroy because every so often “a kind of recrudescence raises its head, like a pest in the soil, which must be extirpated lest it gets a foothold again.”

How right he is: so many people looking to a future which seems fragile, uncertain, precarious. How wonderful to see Merkel and Macron in the news yesterday, holding hands and marking by their presence together a hope for a better future.

Remembrance: It should wake us up. Should shake us up. People of faith and no faith, but particularly us as people of faith: that the sacrifice of so many millions must not go wasted. We as people of faith must stand up and stand out, and name the things that are wrong – even when it is embarrassing or awkward to do so amongst friends or colleagues. To name racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia...: to SAY that it is wrong, never give it any oxygen – so that we can play our part in ensuring that never again should the rise of extremism provide the context for yet another war, where the likes of Noel Hodgson – our first Bishop's son – “Our Boy” – die in mud and blood.

I say all this because we are people of faith and hope. “They left their nets and followed him”, we heard just now in the gospel reading. We follow in hope Jesus, the one who loves us with a passion, cares about us, wants the best for us. The one who died, looking out with arms outstretched, loving us

to the end. Jesus bids us look out into the world with the same passion and love for each and every human being.

So: today, Remembrance Sunday/Armistice 100, we say thank you: thank you for the heroic examples of people who have given all their abilities, talents, gifts, life – to try to change the world to make it a more Godly and more human place: those who use their intelligence to heal and to discover, to feed and comfort those ‘on the edge’. Especially today for those who fought to change political structures or fight for dignity, who strive for world peace, and those who lost their lives doing so.

May the ‘Flame of Remembrance’ be kept always burning, that we may be woken up, shaken up, each year: that we may never forget.

May we, in faith and hope like the first disciples, follow the one who can build up in us the gifts that will make for peace the world over: self-sacrifice, courage, love.

“Our boy ...lies with his own comrades around him, in this tiny close at the top of a hill, looking out over vast open land, where the great winds blow... in the very heart of the land for whose deliverance they all contended to the death.”

Philip Banks, November 2018
