

## **'To Remember; To Remember'**

**Cathedral Commemoration, 10:00 am, Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2016**

### **Remembrance Sunday**

*Sermon by the Rev'd Dr Mike Kirby, Priest-Vicar (SSM), Chester Cathedral*

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12*

May I speak now in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Amen

To remember; to remember. Many of you will not know who I am; some who have come here for the last six or so weeks will know a little more – I'm new here and I come, like many, into this magnificent place with a sense of awe and wonder – the glory to God that the architects over the centuries have tried to convey; and indeed have done so beautifully. And whenever we are new, anywhere, we tend to wander around perhaps with our senses a little more open to that architecture and what is contained therein. For today in particular, Remembrance, perhaps we all should pay special attention to some of those architectural features – the ones which host the memorials for those who have fallen in conflict, giving their lives for others – for us – who often fought with such bravery, with no thought for their own safety, but for the sake of the lives of their brethren. It is truly right that we remember them and we honour their memory.

The main cluster of such memorials are in the South Transept – where the chapel of St George is dedicated to the 22<sup>nd</sup> Cheshire Regiment. When you stand before it, as well as looking at the carving of St George himself, look down – beneath your feet, inlaid in

the floor, are individual tablet inscriptions – each is entitled ‘To Remember’. Two, side by side, notably drew my attention....Private Jones and Major Colvin. The tablets recall their bravery in battles in the First World War; battles they survived but for which their heroic acts drew the award of the Victoria Cross. For Private Jones, the VC was awarded in September 1916 at Morval, part of that immense Battle of the Somme. For Major Colvin, his was won at Klein Zillebeke in September 1917, a place a few miles south east of Ypres. Both died in the middle of the last century some forty or forty-five years later. But perhaps what struck me most was the juxtaposition of the memorials – there is no rank or status here, for their bravery was of the highest order for both of them. Their heroism, part of their memorial, no doubt came from the heart, irrespective of rank - both acting for the sake of others first in the face of such unbelievable danger.

Within that chapel and just across the transept are books listing the fallen from that 22<sup>nd</sup> Cheshire Regiment – an infantry regiment which was formed back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and existed independently for over 300 years. Now forming part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Mercian Regiment, previous battalions fought at Ypres and Passchendaele, and across the continents in France and Gallipoli, to Mesopotamia, Sinai and Palestine in the First World War; and in Dunkirk, Tobruk and the D-day landings in the Second World War. The books list row upon row of names; thousands of them who fell....lest we forget.

Near the crossing, we hear of the heroism of Jack Cornwell; another brave individual awarded the Victoria Cross – but here a young navy lad of 16, from East London, who died, like many others, serving on HMS Chester at the battle of Jutland, in the north sea just off the Danish coast in 1916....the largest naval battle of the first world war and the only full scale clash of battleships. Throughout that fierce

battle, which lasted through the night of May 31<sup>st</sup>, young Jack stayed at his post, shards of steel from shrapnel embedded in his chest. He died in hospital on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, his VC being posthumously awarded in September of that year.

Beneath the organ loft are the lists of officers, NCOs and men of the Cheshire yeomanry who gave their lives in each of the great wars – for God and country. A regiment whose history goes back to 1797 in the formation of light cavalry, drawn up in response to fears of invasion from Napoleonic France; amalgamated at the turn of this century into the Royal Mercian and Lancastrian Yeomanry. The names are numerous, in both memorials – marking their sacrifice.

But in reading and studying each of these – are we merely recounting them as historical events? For those related to the names, they, I suspect, are much more than that – any of us who have lost loved ones, families and friends, will know that their memories are continually with us, forever in our hearts and minds. But what of ourselves as members of the general public? Perhaps it is more important that we read them – for in standing before them I realised that their sacrifice lives on when we read them, their spirit comes alive once more for those of us who never knew them. Not only the circumstances of their great giving, the ultimate of giving, but their stories only sing to us when we read of them, when we pay attention to the memorials – we let them sing their story, and thereby learn from what they want to give us.....which is individual to each and everyone of us. Something unique speaks through their spirit within those memorials – it is set free once we pay them attention....and the honour due.

Attention was at the heart of the matter for both our bible readings chosen for today – one from the Old Testament, the book of

Ecclesiastes which is a Latin term for ‘teacher’ and the second one from the divine teacher himself, Jesus, from his sermon on the Mount. The words of Jesus might be more familiar to some of us; here Jesus paints the contrast between the happenings of the present, compared with the hope and salvation of the kingdom of God. The trials of today are reflected upon in the hope of the future Kingdom; where injustice, trials, tribulations, pain and suffering are no more. The future kingdom offers hope and acts in a way which is righted for all – when the goodness of God will be so irresistible, that to do his will will be the most natural thing to do.

But perhaps the section from the Old Testament might give us equal hope, depending upon how we view it. A hope of change and a learning from the past which comes equally from studying the memorials that we have for the fallen. The writing is a type of speech, at the heart of which are philosophical teachings. The writing could be viewed as showing that everything has its time – the system of God’s creation is sealed, inevitable – nothing has a beginning or end, all has its day. It might appear that within God’s creation, things, good and bad are always going to happen. There is, as said in the last verse, a time for war and a time for peace. But is the balance of each inevitable? Is our best here on earth to make what we can of life, and only to hope and pray for better times in the kingdom of God? Is it such that we can make no impact upon things in our day?

I would beg to differ – I think the balance of each line proves that there is interchangeability; that within our cyclic world of day upon day, year upon year – change can occur, change that brings the joys and blessings of the kingdom of God closer to all of us. Jesus’ own teaching about what we can do as disciples, in doing the will of God now, shows that change can happen now. An interchangeability that

brings more time for fruitfulness, healing, joy, love and peace; at the expense of death, war and hate. This is a balance we can pray for now, today and a balance that we must strive for now, today.

Our memorials highlight happenings in the great wars – but we must never forget, the sacrifice is just as great today, in the conflict areas where our brave servicemen and women are deployed now....the names continue. And whilst they are out there acting for us, for our own freedom and values, we must support them and pray for them. But so too must our prayers go out that we learn from the past; that events like today keep on helping us to learn; that our memorials sing of the fallen over the years and the heroism of many – but to teach that the balance of war and peace need not be inevitable; that we can influence the balance and make the time for peace much greater than the time for war; that our prayers focus on our brave servicemen and women as well as those who look to war to settle difference; that hearts may be changed to find other ways to handle diversity. So when the memorials call us to remember; let it be to remember the past in order to change the future; the balance can be changed, it must be changed through our prayers and our actions - for the sake of our lives and especially the lives of our servicemen and women gone before us.

Amen.