

Remembrance Day – 9th November 2014

'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends'. This is probably one of the most well-known sentences from St John's Gospel and it contains a truth which endures throughout time and crosses continents and cultures. Our lives are a precious gift from God and to risk or forfeit one's life, in order to ensure someone else's will continue, is the greatest sacrifice anyone can make.

We are here today to remember all those who have taken this instruction to heart and given their lives in the cause of freedom: all those who have made the greatest sacrifice of all in order for others to be saved by their selfless deeds. And so today is about remembering friends, loved ones, close and distant relatives and strangers. We especially think of those servicemen and women who have been killed in the major wars of the past few centuries; the Crimean War, the First World War, the Second World War, the Korean War, the Falklands War, the struggles in Northern Ireland, the War in Iraq and Afghanistan, to name but a few. But our remembrance does not stop there. We are also here today to remember those whose names will never appear on any memorials, those lost in operations or battles that are conducted in secret or do not make the headlines. And we are also here to remember those who have lost their lives simply by standing up for a fellow human being.

We are told in the Bible that we must love our neighbours as ourselves, even our enemies. When someone gives their life for another they live this commandment out to its fullest expression as they set an example of absolute self-giving grace. This is what it means to truly value another's humanity. This is what it means to truly care for another's wellbeing.

The Christian tradition is full of examples of individuals who have lived out a self-sacrificial calling in the name of Christ. There are endless saints who are commemorated for showing love to fellow human beings with little or no concern for their own health or wellbeing. The servicemen and women that we remember today are included in this saintly gathering of individuals. But where does such love come from? What makes a person give their own life in the pursuit of saving another's?

The bible continually outlines and highlights the way in which Jesus looks to the Father, as the source and goal of all that Jesus does. Jesus tells the disciples that the Father's love for Him is the source of His love for them. A unity of love binds the sender, God the Father, and the sent one, Jesus the Son. This unity continues on. So it starts with Jesus and the Father. The love Jesus receives from the Father, He then passes onto the Disciples, the Disciples passed it onto the first Christian believers and it has been passed down from generation to generation ever since and so continues down to us today. Christ is always working on us, offering his love in the hope that we might accept it. Sometimes we do, but more often we don't. But even a person who does not believe in Jesus may become an instrument of God's love if they act in a way that recognises another's value or, better still, places that person's value above their own. They may be dedicated Christians or they may have had no time for God in this life, but by participating in acts of self-giving love they play their part in bringing God's Heavenly kingdom one step closer to our earthly existence.

If we are truthful with ourselves, for many of us the sacrifices we remember today set us an example of faith and courage beyond anything we can imagine. But as today's reading from St Matthew's Gospel reminds us, we must always be on the lookout for ways of living in a more self-giving way; a way that elevates other people's value as human beings. In this endeavour we must be vigilant and 'keep awake, for we know neither the day nor the hour' when we will be called to make such a sacrifice on another's behalf.

Through their actions, anyone who lives in this way follows in footsteps of Christ, who gives us the ultimate example of self-sacrifice. Christ's entire life paved the way for his humiliating trial, beating and appalling death. Christ was willing to submit and show great tolerance in order that the greatest bond of love may be sealed. He gave up His life so that we may have an example of what it meant to love, even our enemies. But of course, this ultimate sacrifice was to turn into something much, much more. Through His sacrifice Christ was resurrected from the dead and so opened the gates of glory for us all. He showed us that we could believe in a better world, and that we too could join him in heavenly realms if only our hearts were orientated in the right direction. That direction is love.

So Remembrance Sunday is not about glorifying war, quite the reverse. One only has to tour the battlefields of the Western Front and witness the sheer number of names on memorials and gravestones on those First World War battlefields to realise the sheer folly of war. Remembrance then is about recognising the sacrifice others have made on our behalf in order to try and secure our freedom and peace. And we only do their memory justice if our remembrance instils in us a deep conviction to improve our world and to strive for an end of all conflict. A world where reconciliation and understanding are the overriding principles of international dialogue and not force and aggression. Because every life lost in warfare is a life too many. Those of us who have lost friends or family in war know this only too well. As we look at the world around us, we realise that we have a long way to go – and it will take all of our resolve.

Our Christian tradition offers us one simple rule to aid our endeavours – we must simply recognise the humanity and value of other people, whoever they may be. This Remembrance Sunday we remember individuals who died in order to protect the dignity of others and so whilst we remember these fallen heroes let us use their example to move us closer to Christ and to work to protect the dignity of our fellow human beings, be them friend or stranger.

Amen