

Remembrance Sunday

Fr Barry Hammett

"Bang, bang - you're dead". We'll have heard children say that many times (in fact I heard it only the other day on the bus into Oxford) and indeed we may well have said it ourselves. Play fighting is something common to most animals, a way of preparing for the challenges of life ahead. For us humans it has taken different forms at different times - lead model soldiers, cowboys and indians when I was a child, computer and video games - all with fighting, combat and war as their theme. This is all well and good, but it runs the risk of instilling in us the view that war is somehow a game, somehow fun.

Perhaps that explains why many young men went off to war in 1914 thinking of it as a bit of a lark. Sadly, as we know, they were soon to be disabused of that idea when they discovered the reality of what war is like - dirty, dehumanising, terrifying, painful, fatal, as it always is, just as it is always the result of human failure of some kind. By 1918 there could be no more illusions of fun, as the nation tried to come to terms with a future without a generation of young men, decimated in the fields of Flanders and at sea.

"Bang, bang - you're dead" - but while children may play dead for a while, they get up again with no harm done. The toy soldiers go back in their box chipped, perhaps, but otherwise unscathed, and we turn off the computer or the X-box and go for a cup of tea and a bun. If for no other reason, it is good for us to have this day of remembrance, year on year, lest we forget the reality and come once more to think of war as a game

As I speak the national Act of Remembrance is taking place in London at the Cenotaph. Each year one of the three Service Heads of Chaplaincy takes his turn to be among the clergy gathered there. I had that privilege when I was the Chaplain of the Fleet, and while I have many memories of the day there is one in particular that stands out in my mind. It is the astonishing power of the silence, which you can only truly appreciate if you are standing there. It is quite unlike the quiet of the countryside, for example. Somehow there, in the very centre of London, surrounded by perhaps tens of thousands of people, it is a silence so moving, so deep, so profound, that it feels as if you could touch it if you would but try. It is, I suppose, a silence that can only be generated by a huge number of people with the common purpose of remembering and honouring those who have lost their lives in war, and in its way it must reflect the absence of noise when the guns fell silent at 11 o'clock on the 11th of November in 1918.

Remembrance Day is part of our national consciousness, part of the fabric of our lives. But what do we mean by remembrance, and what is it that we remember anyway? On the first Armistice Day in 1919 that must have been an easy question to answer. There was hardly a family, hardly a community however small in the nation, that had not lost someone they knew and loved. For them the remembrance was simple. They could call to mind not just names but faces and voices and in the sorrow of that remembering of individuals they could offer their loved ones into the care and keeping of Almighty God, perhaps encouraged by those words of Laurence Binyon suggesting that not only would they be forever remembered but that they would remain forever young. Tragically there are still many today for whom the memory is just as acute - not just those, dwindling now in number, who lost loved ones and comrades in arms in the Second great War

of the twentieth century, but also many who have been close to those who have died in much more recent conflicts and to those who continue to give their lives still today.

For most of us such an act of calling to mind is virtually impossible. A few years ago I preached at a service in Liverpool Cathedral to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Battle of the Atlantic, and my research for that sermon brought home to me the sheer scale of the losses (on both sides) in that conflict, especially in the British Merchant Fleet as it strove to keep the nation fed and supplied in the face of deadly attacks by U-boats. The number of those who died was simply unimaginable - more than 100,000 fatalities, of whom more than 72,000 were British sailors and merchant seamen. Scale that up to include all those who have fallen in war before and since and the number surpasses anything that the human mind can comprehend - and most likely all of them men and women whom we did not know and whose image we cannot hold in our minds.

Yet each year on Remembrance Day we do attempt the impossible in some way or another. I was Chaplain of the Fleet in 2003 at the time of the wretched war in Iraq, and my unhappiest duty was to stand, robed just as I am today, on the tarmac at Brize Norton as those members of the Naval Service, Royal Navy and Royal Marines, who had died in the conflict were brought home. Standing there as the coffins were carried individually and with great dignity from the aircraft in front of grieving friends and relatives, I could not avoid the thought that though I did not know even what these men and women looked like, yet I had an absolute duty to be there to pray for them and for their families and to offer their immortal souls to God's care and keeping. And so it is, year on year, for all of us.

We make the attempt to hold them in prayer before Almighty God.

But perhaps that is a peculiarly human way of thinking about it. Do we really imagine that in our remembrance we are somehow reminding God of people and events from days past? It may be so for us, shackled as we are by the constraints of the passage of time, but we too easily forget that Almighty God knows no such constraints. Unlike us he dwells not in time but in eternity, and everything and everyone, past, present and yet to come, are constantly before him in one eternal now. He sees not just what we are and what we have been but what we shall be. Those whom we remember on this day are eternally in his sight, under his loving gaze. We do not need to bring them there, but rather we are given grace to know more clearly, for a few moments, the embrace in which he holds them, and us, and all of creation.

The hymn "Dear Lord and Father of mankind" has the following verse:

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love!

Perhaps the breathtaking depth and solidity of that silence I remember at the Cenotaph was nothing other than a glimpse of that "silence of eternity", one of those privileged moments when we know the gentle touch of the hand of God in the affairs of humankind when we come before him in prayer.

"They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old", we say each Remembrance Day. And these words express a truth, because those whom we remember, and all who have died, have passed from the shackles of time into the freedom of eternity which knows no corruption. Truly "Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn". As for us, slaves as we are to the relentless passage of time, "At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them".