

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 10th November 2024, Pentecost 25

Readings: **Ruth 3:1-5; 4:3-17**

Psalm 127

Hebrews 9: (19-22) 23-28

Mark 12:38-44

Tomorrow is known in much of the western world as Remembrance Day because on that day one hundred and six years ago the guns on the Western Front became silent. After four years of conflict, an Armistice was signed and First World War hostilities ceased. It is unsettling to read the statistics for in four short years Australia and her Allies lost 5,152,115 men, with a further 12,831,004 being wounded; in comparison, Germany and her Allies lost 3,386,200 men, with a further 8,388,448 being wounded.

In churches, schools, and communities throughout southern Queensland there are honour boards which name those who lost their lives in 'The Great War', and they make sobering reading. In small country churches I've often wondered about the impact on particular families when three or four people remembered have the same surname. Many were young men who went with a longing for adventure, and the hope that their lives would make a difference for good.

The poem '*Dulce et Decorum est*' by Wilfrid Owen offers a glimpse into elements of the horror they experienced, and the memories that survivors lived with for the rest of their days. I'll read it now to help us imagine something of the nightmare:

*"Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.*

*Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.*

*Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime. —*

*Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.*

*If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin.*

*If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—*

*My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: Dulce et decorum est
pro patria mori.”*

The Latin words of the last line are an ironic quote from a Roman poem which translate: *‘It is sweet and proper to die for one’s country!’* I think most of us would agree that it would never be sweet or proper for someone to painfully die from lungs blistered and bleeding...

So, tomorrow we can give thanks for the peace that was achieved back in 1918 and pause in the midst of our living for a minute’s silence. However, the First World War was referred to at the time as ‘the war to end wars’ and clearly war between and within countries has continued to this day. So, we can also pray tomorrow for peace in the many places where there is ongoing conflict and I think especially of the war between Gaza, Israel, and Lebanon which is often in the news; the war between Ukraine and Russia which is sometimes in the news; and the civil war in Sudan which seems never to make the news.

In addition, we can pray for peace makers and peace keepers... conscious that we can never take peace for granted. We are fortunate to have a Defence Force which has three branches: the Royal Australian Army; the Royal Australian Air Force; and, the Royal Australian Navy. At the 2014 General Synod of the Anglican Church, it was agreed that the Sunday closest to Remembrance Day be designated ‘Defence Sunday’. The invitation implicit in this is that we not only pray for peace in the world, but also pray for God’s blessing on the men and women who serve, and who have served, in the Australian Defence Force.

In the Western Region I'd like us to particularly remember those who work from the RAAF and Army base at Amberley, and those who work from the Army helicopter base at Oakey.

In addition, we are also invited to pray for God's blessing on the ministry of Anglican chaplains in each branch of the ADF as they care for military personnel and their families, and make Christ's love known to them.

If we accept that we live in a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic country... how do we choose to live our lives? How do we use the abilities and resources we have? And, what do we give priority to?

Today's Gospel offers uncomfortable insight into this, particularly for religious leaders and religious institutions. Jesus is remembered saying to his disciples, and anyone who would listen, *'beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the best seats and the places of honour at banquets. They devour widows' houses, and for the sake of appearance say long prayers...'*

It is a breathtaking condemnation. A condemnation which can be reinterpreted and paraphrased – *'Beware of the scribes... because they are hypocrites and posers, who have no integrity. They ostentatiously pray and talk about love, while robbing widows of their right to property and independent living.'*

Then Jesus is remembered sitting opposite the Temple treasury to watch people publicly make their contributions. Many rich people put in large amounts of money and this would have put a smile on the faces of those in authority because they had bills to pay and a business to run. But Jesus seemed unimpressed until a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He affirmed that she had done more than any of the others because she had given all she had to live on.

Uncomfortable questions can help as we consider this passage:

- As individuals are we like the rich people giving to God only what we have left over... or, are we more like the widow, giving everything?
- Could we offer more of our resources and time to God? And,
- As a community of faith – how do we respond to those who have need?

May we use the hard won freedom we've inherited wisely. May we collaboratively use the gifts we have to bring about positive change; and may God's Spirit empower us, with wisdom, courage, and generosity in the way we live our lives. We ask in the name of Christ, who shows us the way. Amen.