

Remembrance Sunday

All Saints Coddington, 8th November 2009

In July this year Henry Allingham, who was in the navy and fought in the battle of Jutland, and was England's oldest man, died aged 113. In August, Harry Patch, the last British survivor of those who fought in the trenches in World War 1, died aged 111, so we can now say World War 1 is not in living memory in this country – it's history and it is interesting to reflect on the history those men have experienced, covering 3 centuries and 6 monarchs. For most people, World War 2 is also history, but I do have an objection to calling anything history that I have lived through myself, but I guess I must reconcile myself to that.

Now history is important. As we look back at the death and destruction of those two great events we can only wonder, How did we get drawn into them, and even more important, How do we avoid making the same mistakes again. Those lives which were lost in the two world wars would have been lost in vain if we do not try to avoid similar things happening again. In religious terms we have to repent – recognise the evil which has happened and do something active about it.

So history is very important, but we must look at it from a Christian point of view. History is written by the survivors and the victors and there is a danger in justifying our actions when we ought to recognise our complicity in them. History is also very difficult and the documents and newsreels and other evidence all need understanding and interpretation. A simple example is in the list of names we read out each year. Over the years as I have stood in Colwall or Coddington to hear them read out, I have mentally been thankful that the World War 2 list is much shorter than that for World War 1. But this is misleading. Estimates of the total deaths in World War 2 range from 50 – 70 million whereas the estimate for World War 1 is about 16 million. In other words three times as many people died in the second World War as in the first. The difference arises from the fact that in World War 2, most of the deaths were of civilians and in the East where the war was conducted with a ferocity never experienced before. We don't put civilian deaths on war memorials – but we wouldn't have room for them if we did.

Remembrance Sunday is a national occasion when we commemorate the bravery of our own soldiers who fell in battle; and quite right too. But I think we can spare a thought for civilians and those caught up in battle in other countries while we are doing that. Here's another statistic giving food for thought. Civilian deaths in France outnumbered those in the UK by 4 to 1. This was partly due to the German occupation, but also to the Allied bombardment prior to the D-Day landings, so thousands of French civilians died as a result of Allied bombing. It is easy to get lost in all these figures: Stalin once said that a single death was a tragedy, but a million was a statistic. On Remembrance day we need to remember that that is the devil speaking and not forget the million tragedies.

I suppose one thing we can say we have learnt from World War 1 is never again to commit our soldiers on that scale or to accept that casualty rate. But I am not too sure about this either. We quite rightly remember the battle of Britain pilots, but we do tend to forget the Bomber Command aircrew whose casualty rate was much greater than that of fighter command and similar to that of an infantry officer in World War 1. Let us not make too many comparisons, but let us be very careful indeed about putting our young men in harm's way. War is the devil's game – far better not to play it.

But can we avoid it? Well, I am not a pacifist, so I guess I believe we cannot altogether, but perhaps we don't do as much as we could to stop the reasons for

conflicts from arising. Would the second World War have started if the settlement of the first war been less vindictive? Could Hitler have been stopped if we had been more resolute over Czechoslovakia? It is easy to forget that what happens in other countries affects us and I think this happened in the months leading up to World War 2. Remember Chamberlain's words:

“How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing.”

One can sympathise with him whole heartedly and I am sure he had the country behind him but what goes on overseas affects us here and we need to be concerned about injustice wherever it occurs in the world. And this is even more important in today's globalised economy. To misquote John Donne, no country is an island, even if it is surrounded by water.

The twentieth century must surely have been the bloodiest in human history. What can we do to make sure the 21st does not repeat this? Well, the threats that face us now are different from those that faced us then. There are megalomaniacs in power, but fortunately not in charge of such large and powerful nations as Germany, Russia, China and Japan. But we are faced with competition for resources as the ever-growing population demands more and more from the planet. Climate change is happening; the demand for oil is outstripping the supply; nuclear weapons are proliferating; terrorism is increasing; we are degrading the environment and in short we are living as if there's no tomorrow, or certainly no 2050 or a 22nd century. Any one of these threats is enough to bring about conflict repeatedly. Maybe not a global war like the two world wars, but enough to bring about death and devastation on a similar scale. This is a catastrophe we must avoid.

And it is not beyond the wit of man to avoid them, but not by doing nothing. We look to our politicians to sort out many of these problems by diplomacy, but they cannot be solved just by talking. We ourselves need to take action and that action will change our lifestyles. But change can be for the better, rather than the worse. There is no reason why a sustainable lifestyle cannot be enjoyable. But one which is forced on us by the course of events could be hard indeed.

Now we have come a long way from a war memorial in a country church to solving the problems of the planet and it is easy to feel powerless in the face of these challenges. How can what I do change things? But there are things you can do as an individual – how about starting with reducing your carbon footprint? And if you want to know how to do that come to our Colwall Greener meeting in St Crispin's on Monday and we will help you.

We can all make a contribution, but nevertheless the problems of the planet do require political solutions and you can help here too. Politics is the art of the possible and what is possible in a politician's mind is constrained by what the public thinks. And if you don't think public opinion has much influence just cast your mind back to the expenses scandal. If we could only mobilise that sense of public outrage towards a desire for peace and justice in the world we would not have to worry about World War 3.

This is Remembrance Sunday. The people we remember died showing great courage, but they died for their country and to bring peace to the world. You cannot honour them and then do nothing to maintain peace. Remember those words: “for your tomorrow, we gave our today.” Let us not waste that tomorrow they bought for us.