



11 May 2014
The Third Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Joel 3 vv. 9–16
John 15 vv. 9–17

The Glory and Misery of War
By Mr Steve Mastin
Head of History, Sawston Village College

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be now and ever acceptable in thy sight oh God our strength and our redeemer.
Amen.

I confess that I have no philosophy, nor piety, nor patience, no art of reflection, no theory of compensation to meet things so hideous, so cruel and so mad; they are just unspeakably horrible and irremediable to me.

When Henry James reacted to the news of the death of his friend, Rupert Brooke, he expressed what I believe to be the natural response to War. When we reflect on the causes, the effects, the nature of War, we too should be appalled.

I have no intention this evening of glorying in war. I cannot find a single example in the teachings of Christ that would support such a philosophy. The man who told us to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, to do good to those who persecute us – this is a man who exemplifies the opposite of war.

So how then do we reconcile our faith in Christ with what we do on Remembrance Day? How do we mourn those who have died taking up arms and stay true to Christ's Gospel of love, forgiveness and reconciliation? How can we fund a standing armed forces and yet cling to his gospel?

For as long as there have been humans, there have been wars. The first human parents in Scripture experience the first loss because of hatred in the human heart. One of the remarkable things about our Bible is that the human condition is laid bare – to quote Pascal, we find in it the 'glory and misery of the human condition'.

Perhaps this is a good starting point when considering a Christian response to war – the glory and the misery.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Sir Edward Elgar, one of England's most celebrated composers, wrote a series of marches he called *Pomp and Circumstance*. He took his title from Act 6 of *Othello*, where the character, leaving his soldier's profession, declares, "Farewell to the...pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!" Britain was at the height of her power when Elgar penned this now famous piece – we commanded the seas, a quarter of the world in an expanding empire, and we were seemingly invincible.

Listen to the opening of this piece of music. We are all familiar with its tune – let's now listen to it considering the circumstances in which it was written.

[Extract of Elgar: *Pomp & Circumstance* March #1 In D, Op. 39/1]

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Steve Mastin



11 May 2014
The Third Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Joel 3 vv. 9–16
John 15 vv. 9–17

You can hear the confidence, sense the triumph and imperial power. The words we know as Land of Hope and Glory were not Elgar's. They were subsequently added by Arthur Benson on the King Edward VII's recommendation. And of course, they capture that mood that was prevalent on the eve of the Great War – Britain was invincible. 'God who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet.'

These words rang hollow on the 11 November 1918 when the guns fell silent. 900,000 British and Commonwealth men lay dead, tens of thousands of them were never recovered to be buried. Their bodies still lie in Flanders Fields.

Each year I take my pupils who are studying the Great War to these battlefields. And each year I watch as they react to the scale of loss. Wearing a poppy, pausing at eleven o'clock – these are a part of our shared culture, things they grow up with. But their reactions upon visiting Tyne Cot cemetery, the largest Commonwealth cemetery in the world, are very revealing. Tyne Cot is the resting place for nearly 12,000 men who fought at the battle of Passchendaele. One of the activities I ask pupils to complete while visiting the cemetery I decided to try for myself. They have to choose any row of 50 graves and record the age and rank of each soldier as well as noting the number of unknown graves marked simply, 'Known unto God'. I found the average rank was Private, the average age 23, the number of men known only to God, 40 out of 50.

This is the reality of war. Here we see Pascal's misery of the human condition. There is little glory in this cemetery. And Edward Elgar noted this too. From 1914-1918, appalled and disillusioned by the war, he hardly composed at all. Then in the final months of the war he checked into a London nursing home to have his tonsils removed. Whilst convalescing in a thatched cottage in the beautiful Sussex countryside, the war still made its presence felt. Each night he could hear the rumblings of artillery fire and shell bursts from across the Channel on the Western Front. In the months that followed, Elgar poured his feelings into four works that rank among the finest he ever composed.

Listen to the opening of the fourth and final work, first performed the year after the War.

[Extract of Elgar: Cello Concerto In E Minor, Op. 85 - 1. Adagio Moderato]

Gone is the swagger, the optimism, confidence, there isn't even a sense of victory. It is his lament for a lost world.

So where is the 'glory' of Pascal's glory and misery of the human condition? Surely war displays only misery, the tragedy of a lost generation which continues into our day; lives, full of potential, sacrificed in a far-away land.

Consider one story that I relay to my pupils. William McFadzean, a 20 year old Ulsterman, joined up and was off to the Western Front. On the first day of the Battle of the Somme, a day etched into the collective memory of the British army as the bloodiest day of our military history, McFadzean was possibly the first casualty of the 57,000 who fell that day. The whistle was to blow at 0600 hours when the first wave of men would go over the top in a major offensive to break the stalemate that had existed since the end of 1914.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Steve Mastin



11 May 2014
The Third Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Joel 3 vv. 9–16
John 15 vv. 9–17

Billy, as he was known to his friends and family, was given the job of handing grenades to each man down the trench, 10 minutes before the off. He began to make his way down the line of anxious men when suddenly the bottom of the box gave way and the grenades tumbled out. As he began to collect them he noticed two of them were without pins. With no time to try to find them, and without hesitation, Billy threw himself onto the ground, covering the detonated grenades. His name appears on the Thiepval Memorial, a brave soldier, awarded the Victoria Cross, whose body was never recovered.

“Greater love has no man than this. If he lay down his life for his friends.”

I see in Billy McFadzean the glory of war. His sacrifice, his courage, his selflessness. The glory and misery of the human condition. In war, humans have the opportunity to display virtues on a grand scale. Those aspects of our human condition that are so often hidden. We have the capacity for great misery and for great glory.

Consider the cross – in it is both great misery and great glory. St Paul gloried in the cross, and yet it is also a tragic event in human history. Christ’s suffering and passion is also his badge of glory.

How easily in churches in November, do we quote Christ’s words and then stop before he has finished.

“Greater love has no man than this. That he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I have commanded.”

If you do what I have commanded. In his sermon on the mount, Christ said to us,

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.”

Wars are fought on a grand scale between nations and armies. However, making peace can begin on a small scale. The last Tommy of the Great War, Harry Patch, spent much of the rest of his life trying to repair the damage wrought by war. One memory seared into his mind he recalled in his book, *The Last Fighting Tommy*...

“We came across a lad who was ripped open from his shoulder to his waist by shrapnel and lying in a pool of blood. When we got to him, he said: ‘Shoot me’. He was beyond human help and, before we could draw a revolver, he was dead. And the final word he uttered was ‘Mother.’ It’s an image that has haunted me.”

Harry met Germans and warmly embraced them, he campaigned for reconciliation, and spoke out against the horrors of war as one who knew them. My pupils compare the British cemetery with the German cemetery at Langemark, something unthinkable for British children to have done fifty years ago, yet powerfully poignant. Battlefields trips are fairly recent innovations and long may they continue throughout this centenary.

I believe Harry Patch is a peacemaker. It is one of the tragedies of our world and our human condition that war is sometimes the only option left to restore justice.

May God speed that day that the prophet Micah longed for, when nation shall not lift up sword against nation. And may we, perhaps not on a grand scale, but in whatever way we can, be instruments of his peace, and work for reconciliation.

Amen.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Steve Mastin