“We Will Remember Them…. But why?”

The eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month—that’s the moment when the guns fell silent on the Western Front in 1918 and the Armistice ending the First World War came into effect. Ever since then Remembrance ceremonies have been held in Britain and the Commonwealth either on the 11th of November or on the nearest Sunday or on both.

But what exactly are such ceremonies for? What is it that we’ve gathered to remember this morning, and how do we remember it? The truth is that on this occasion we do a variety of things. What’s more, different people do different, sometimes even contradictory things. Indeed, sometimes it feels as if the contradiction runs not only between us, but through us. For Remembrance Sunday conjures up a babel of quite deep emotions, I think, which can embarrass and confuse us.

Let me try to throw some light on the confusion.

Some people feel that Remembrance ceremonies are by their very nature militaristic, and are therefore unchristian, and should be avoided. My own view is that not everything military is militaristic. One can carry a flag without waving it. And if you’ve ever watched the Remembrance ceremony at the Cenotaph in Westminster, then, notwithstanding its military bands and its regimental flags, I think you’ll agree that the prevailing mood is not at all jingoistic, but most definitely sombre.

Remembrance ceremonies—or Remembrance Sunday services—need not be militaristic, and I don’t think that Christians need feel embarrassed by them on that count.

This is all the more so, when we observe that one of the main things that we remember on Remembrance Sunday are the evils of war. We remember the dead. We remember very young lives cut short. We remember very young lives cut short. If you visit military cemeteries of the two world wars what shocks most is the age of those who were killed—many of them much younger than the actors who play them in the war movies—18, 19, 20, 21. The age of undergraduates.

War causes very great damage, loss, evil. And it’s important for us to remember that, so that we don’t take for granted the peace that we now enjoy. My grandparents suffered two world wars; my parents suffered one; I have suffered none. For me, peace is normal. Wars, if they happen, happen elsewhere. But that hasn’t always been the case. And we ought not to assume that it will always be the case. Peace is fragile. It needs our active care and attention. And remembering the evils of war reminds us of that. So this kind of remembrance is salutary. It is pacific. It makes for peace.

So far, I think I can presume that we are agreed. But when it comes to the issue of war as an instrument of justice, I am confident that we will find ourselves disagreeing.

I have a penchant for visiting military cemeteries. In May of this year I paid my third visit to the German military cemetery at Maleme in Crete. Maleme is where the decisive battle was fought in May 1941 between British and allied forces on the one hand, and German paratroops on the other. At the cemetery, there is a very well presented exhibition, part of which tells the story of the three Von Bluecher brothers. All three were in the same German parachute regiment. The two younger brothers, who hero-worshipped the older one, had followed him into his elite regiment. All three of them were killed on the same day at Maleme. The youngest one was still in his teens. It’s a heart-breaking story. A very tragic story. And from this story, and others like it, the
exhibition at Maleme draws the conclusion: war is evil, and we must resolve to avoid it absolutely and everywhere.

Well, yes … but no. For one thing about which the exhibition was disingenuously silent, was the awkward question of what young Germans were doing dropping out of the skies onto Crete in May 1941. And that then raises the sharp question of how those on the ground were supposed to respond to them. The only way to have avoided war at all costs, would have been to allow Hitler’s armies to do as they wished. But with what consequences? Not just for the Jews, but for the Slavs, for the communists, for the liberals, for the gays, for the gypsies, and indeed for the non-Fascist Christians?

It’s true that some Christians think that non-violent resistance, such as was effective against the British in India, could have been used successfully against the Nazis in Europe. Some of you may think that. I, for one, remain skeptical.

But if you don’t think that, and if you share my skepticism, then you will entertain the possibility that war, with all its undoubted and great evils, might still be the only effective way of stopping even greater evils. War as an instrument, a terrible instrument, of justice. War as an instrument so terrible that we should seek to avoid it at great cost—but not at all costs.

“Fine,” you might say, “perhaps the war against Hitler was justified; and so we can remember those who served and suffered in the Allied cause with pride and gratitude. But what about the First World War, surely that was a futile war, whose motives and aims had no moral justification? How can we remember that with anything but embarrassment and shame?”

Well, embarrassment and shame have their place on an occasion like this. Even justified wars have their shameful moments: the war against Hitler had its bombing of Dresden. So perhaps we should mingle pride with shame. But to mingle is not to eclipse. Maybe loyalty to the truth of the matter requires that we learn to live with the tension of both.

But was the Great War ‘futile’—meaning that it achieved nothing worthwhile? This has been a popular view since at least the late 1960s, the era of Flower Power and Vietnam. But I doubt that it’s correct.

Most of our grandparents or great-grandparents didn’t see the Great War as futile. At the time most people believed that Britain was morally obliged to come to the defence of Belgium and France against aggressive, Prussian militarism. Yes, the famous war poet, Siegfried Sassoon protested against the war—but he didn’t protest that it should never have been entered upon, only that it shouldn’t continue. And that’s a view from which he later recanted. To most of those at the time the Great War was terrible, tragic, piteous, heart-rending—but necessary. And that seems to be the view that now prevails among contemporary historians.

But surely, you say, nothing could have been worth all that slaughter? Well, that raises an important and very difficult question: how much is justice worth? When are its costs too high? But think on this: the total number of deaths during World War One was about 20 million; while the total number of deaths during World War Two was about 72 million. One reason why World War Two feels less costly, more worthwhile to Britons is that we, the British, were never engaged on the main front. That fell to the Russians, who lost 11 million military dead, compared to our 383,000 and America’s 407,000. And the
Russians died in conditions no prettier than those afforded by the Somme in 1916 or Passchendaele in 1917, whose centenary we commemorate this year.

So if we reckon that the War against Hitler was somehow ‘worth it’, despite its enormous overall cost (and most of us do), then the terrible (but significantly smaller) slaughter of the Great War does not, by itself, render it unjustified.

So it’s not clear to me that those who lost their lives for the Allied cause in the Great War—some of whose names cascade down the southern wall of the west entrance to this cathedral—simply wasted them. It’s not clear that either the cause or its instrument were unjust. So maybe a measure of pride and gratitude can enter into our remembering even them.

Together we remember and lament the terrible evils of war. Together we remember and lament the tragedy that envelopes people on all sides in wartime. Together we remember and lament the fragility of peace. And out of our remembering and lamenting, together we resolve to work for the peace that is only ever an achievement, never a natural, default state.

Beyond this, we divide. Some, having drawn pacifist conclusions, will resolve to oppose all war everywhere. Others of us, believing that war can sometimes be an instrument of justice, will be proud of those who have served and suffered justly, and grateful to them. But, remembering that war is only ever a terrible instrument of justice, which brings great evils in its wake, we will resolve to use it very sparingly indeed.

Nevertheless, those of us who believe in the possibility of justified war will recognize that it is possible to go to war too late, as well as too soon. For example, in 1999 during a debate about NATO’s military intervention in Kosovo, the then Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, said this: “Terrible things happened earlier [in Bosnia], especially [the massacre of 7,000 Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica] …. Should we have intervened earlier at that point? If we did not intervene at that point and should have done, how much responsibility do [we] bear for failing to face up to evil and [to] support the necessary stern measures?”

And, of course, in Rwanda we didn’t go to war at all. Which was good for us. But not so good for the Tutsis.

The same applies, of course, to Syria.

So, in addition to remembering and lamenting, and resolving to work for peace and to resist going to war too soon, some of us will also pray for the courage not to go to war too late, and for the wisdom to discern when the moment for terrible action has come.

Here on Remembrance Sunday, then, we’re doing a variety of things. Some of them we do together; some we do apart. But every one of us has, I think, sufficient reason why, at the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we should remember them.

_Nigel Biggar,_
_Christ Church Cathedral_
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