10 November 2019: Requiem Eucharist
Remembrance Sunday
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+ Jesus said, 'The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.'

Remembrance Sunday evokes complicated emotions. Grief, of course, for the fallen; admiration for those who bravely offered the sacrifice of their lives for the peace of others; pain for the many who died in fear and agony, and for all those who did not die, but never recovered from injuries to body and mind; compassion for those who mourned; anger at the waste and pointless loss of life, civilian as well as military, at the atrocities perpetrated against the defenceless.

Planning and participating in a Remembrance Day service has always involved a delicate balancing act: the need to acknowledge and pay tribute to the sacrifice of the fallen without ever forgetting the horror of war, or the necessity for us to reaffirm our commitment to peace. That balance is carefully navigated in this service, which we began with a formal, public act of remembrance at the memorials to the two world wars in the Cathedral’s porch, from which we have moved seamlessly into a Requiem Eucharist for the fallen (thanks in large measure to the offices of the choir in singing Fauré’s haunting and evocative setting).

Those who serve in time of war do not only face daily the reality of their own deaths, they must accept that their potentially-imminent death may occur in the context of actions of their own which, however much necessitated by the war in which they fight, they might in other circumstances wish they had not perpetrated. Not only must they put themselves regularly in danger’s way, they have to do things which, in civilian life, would be condemned, including, when required to break the sixth commandment – ‘thou shalt not kill’. And whether they live or die, they have to accept the consequences of those actions.
Yet, in the confusion and chaos that characterises all battles, how can they devote any
time to their own spiritual preparation? And how, in the midst of any war, could any
proper funerary rites have been offered for those who had died? Remember, in the
context of the horrors of the trenches of the First World War, the words of Wilfrid
Owen: ‘What passing-bells for these who die as cattle? / Only the monstrous anger of the
guns. / Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle / Can patter out their hasty orisons.’ Those
words need little adaptation – even taking account of developments in military hardware
over the last century – to sound as relevant to young lives lost in the various global
theatres of war where British armed forces are serving today, among them Afghanistan,
Iraq and South Sudan.

We remember the fallen today and we also pray for them, for those for whom scant
prayer was offered in the heat of battle, for those whose graves remain unknown and
unmarked. We pray for all those victims of war ‘whose tears were their meat day and
night, who daily asked ‘where is now thy God?’ echoing the prayer of psalm 42.

Yet, we should be clear what our prayer is for. We do not pray as a way of lobbying God,
petitioning him to change the fate of civilian or military war dead, or to change God’s
mind about any of those whom we love but see no longer. We pray for the dead because
we love them. And our act of love expresses our confidence both in God’s redeeming
power, and in Christ’s promises of salvation of which we heard in our gospel reading.
There Jesus spoke about the living God to the Sadducees, a group of believers of his own
day who argued that there is no resurrection.

Countering their misapprehension (and neatly side-stepping the intellectual trap that
they had tried to set for him about the childless woman, who had married seven brothers
in turn), Jesus responded by arguing that ‘The Lord, the God of Abraham, is God not of
the dead, but of the living’. He did not say this in order to imply that God is indifferent
to those who have died. Far from it; God has not forgotten them, for in him they are not
dead, but still alive. But alive in a way that does not resemble the life that we have known
on earth, a continuation of our mortal existence in which we marry or are given in
marriage – the only kind of life that the Sadducees could imagine in their arid
philosophising.

The dead are like angels; they are the children of God. And so they will remain for all
eternity. Death, Jesus explained to the Sadducees is the end of many things, but it is not
the end of everything. ‘I know’, Job asserted in our first reading, ‘that my redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth’. Job fully understood that death does
not mean the death of God. We may be, as Paul wrote to Timothy, living in a certain
time, but God alone is immortal. Paul urged Timothy to guard what had been entrusted
to him, to store up ‘the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that he might
take hold of the life that really is life.’

But those who died in war, babes and children, women and men, civilians and military
alike enjoyed no such opportunities to lay foundations for their futures. We pray for all
these our dead, because for them, the readiness and spiritual preparation for death for
which we all hope, was denied. And we pray that future generations may enjoy the peace
that Christ left with us, his peace that he gave to us. We pray for that peace which was
denied to all those killed as a result of any conflict, but perhaps denied the most cruelly
to those who fell on active military service for their country.

We owe it to them that we should not forget them, nor forget that they are, even now,
living with God. ‘At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember
them.’ As we offer our prayers for our broken and war-torn world, we rejoice in the
promises of the God of the living, praising him for his abiding presence from generation
to generation. Just as he has called us to share in the glory of Christ, so may we one day
rejoice with all the saints in his kingdom of light and peace.

AMEN