16 October 2018: Civic Service
Tuesday during Ordinary Time
Revelation 21-22

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I am the first Chancellor of Oxford University in 80 years not to fight in a European war. I belong to a lucky generation. I was born right at the end of Europe’s second bloody civil war in the 20th Century.

My predecessor but one, Harold Macmillan, was wounded five times in the First World War. He used to talk quite a lot about that war and the friends he had lost in the trenches of Picardy. For him, there was a terrible moral obscenity about this city and this university and what they stand for, on the one hand, and that dreadful war on the other.

Macmillan used to note time and again that on the memorials in many University colleges to those who had fallen in war, you would see German, Austrian and Italian names listed among the British, with no mention of nationality. Young men, and later young women too, were brought to this great European city, to this great European university, where they would study the history and literature and science of our shared European civilisation, and then they would return to their homes to be taught to kill one another.

We were members of the same European family with the same common inheritance. How could we allow this family to be torn apart by what Winston Churchill called “that series of frightful nationalistic quarrels”.

After the first Great War, some thought that education was the key to preventing further hostilities. Fear of others, they argued, was often caused by ignorance; ignorance which often led to hatred of others. The best antidote to ignorance was education.

It is interesting that three of the greatest men, intellectually, of the 20th Century – Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell and Karl Popper – all became, for a time, school teachers after 1918. That was their own response to nationalist hatred, their response to the way in which patriotism had often slid into extreme nationalism, defining itself against other
people, glamorising its own history and institutions and frequently spreading loathing and prejudice about others.

There was something that every part of the European family needed to remember, that we were all brothers and sisters, joined together by more than separated us, sharing in a common humanity.

There is a good story from the history of the First War, which makes this point very well.

In the summer of 1914, there was a large number of foreign students in Oxford doing vacation courses. The same thing happens today. They were housed around the town. Not surprisingly, many of them were from Germany and Austria. After all, we were close friends, culturally, of Germany. More than half of the honorary degrees given by the University in 1914 went to Germans, including a degree for the composer Richard Strauss.

But we drifted, we sleepwalked into war. Suddenly, in August, there were hundreds of students from what had become alien countries, marooned in Oxford. How could they be helped to get home before hostilities broke out, before the journey became impossible? Before, perhaps, they were interned.

Two things happened simultaneously in the first weeks of August. First, the Dean of this Cathedral and College helped to organise the mobilisation of young men from the University and City to join the British Army. Second, he helped an Oxford lecturer called John Marriott (who later became the MP from the City) to organise the swift and safe passage home of German and Austrian men and women, as well as people of other nationalities.

Town and gown, City and University, came together, raising money to look after the students while they were still here and then providing them with the money to help pay for their passage home.

Many British citizens and students who joined up from Oxford in those days in the British Army must have been killed or injured, as Harold Macmillan was. Doubtless, the same was true for some of the Germans and Austrians whom we helped to return home. There were many women among those helped on the way back to Germany. The Dutch Consul in London who helped, diplomatically, to organise the journeys back to Germany and Austria, referred to “the proofs of humanity and great kindness” displayed by Oxford to the citizens of the nations with which Britain was, by then, at war.
In all the frenzy and excitement of the beginning of the War, with the beating of drums and the call of the bugles, Oxford still remembered the importance of humane values, the values of civility and friendship, values which we should never ever forget. Attachment to those values should continue to define us. They are what will help us to avoid, in the years ahead, slipping and sliding over a dark horizon. We should learn from the past in order to avoid its grimmest legacy.