23 June 2019: Choral Matins
The First Sunday after Trinity
The Revd Canon Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology
‘1944: Christian Reflections on the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary’

I’ve read and re-read the Scripture readings assigned for today, and inspiration has generally not struck. So, apart from one point, I’m going to set them aside and talk largely about something else.

The one point I’ll run with is the importance of remembering events of saving grace, and of letting our lives be oriented by them. In our reading from the book, Deuteronomy, the Israelites are addressed and told,

> Remember today that your children were not the ones who saw and experienced the discipline of the Lord your God, his majesty, his outstretched arm, the signs he performed and the things he did in the heart of Egypt, both to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his whole country …. It was not your children who saw what he did for you in the desert until you arrived at this place …. But it was your own eyes that saw all these great things the Lord has done. Observe therefore all the commands I am giving you today …. faithfully obey the commands … to love the Lord your God and serve him with all your heart and will all your soul …. (11.2-3, 5, 7-8, 13).

The problem that the passage addresses is that the next generation, like all future generations, will have no direct experience of God’s liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in the land of Egypt. The solution enjoined is that future generations should embody the memory by structuring their lives around it—by obeying the command to love God and serve him. So that is the single point that I shall take from this morning’s readings: the importance of remembering acts of grace by structuring our lives around them. I’ll take this and apply it to the 75th anniversary of 1944.

My father was a mildly dour Scot, and typically a man of few words. He spent just over a year in the British Army, fighting in Italy from April 1944 to the end of the war in
Europe in May 1945. Notwithstanding his natural reticence, I did manage to squeeze out of him half a dozen anecdotes about his war-experience before he died in his late eighties in 2001. One anecdote had him spending a pitch-dark night on a hill as a stretcher-bearer, only to discover, when dawn broke, that he was stranded right in the middle of no-man’s land, with the Germans in front and the British behind.

During the past twelve months I made three visits to the National Archives at Kew, where I read the war diaries of my father’s units. As a result, I found what I believe to be the hill on which my father was stranded—in the Apennine mountains north of Florence. And in early May of this year, I climbed it and stood roughly where, I think, he spent a tense night in mid-October 1944.

The young friends I was walking with asked me what it meant for me to be there. It meant several things. One of them is that however bad Brexit is, it’s not that bad. Seventy-five years ago young Germans were trying to kill young Britons, and vice versa, on a hill in Italy—and elsewhere. Wherever Brexit leads us, it won’t be back there.

But more deeply, standing on my father’s hill meant this. I was born in 1955, eleven years after the end of the Second World War. Memories of the war were fresh in my parents’ minds, but for me it felt a whole world away. Looking back at the age of 64, however, what strikes me is how very close I was to it. A mere eleven years separated me from my father’s night-time ordeal. What strikes me is how very fortunate I have been. Born in 1913, my father lived through two world wars. He didn’t ask for them; he didn’t want them. They came upon him, as they came upon millions of others. And the second time, war led him into the middle of a night-time battle on an Italian hill. My life, by contrast, has never been engulfed by war. I have been very fortunate. Standing on my father’s hill, I remembered that. And it made me deeply grateful.

But there’s more. Those who know me know that I have a general fascination with war. One of the reasons is that war is one of the most testing experiences that human beings can face. As I read about it, I am constantly admiring of those who have faced it—and I am constantly wondering how I, as a Christian, would face such things, if I had to.

At least since I was an undergraduate here in Oxford, I have admired Christians who do not use their faith as an excuse to run away from harsh realities. I still possess an essay I wrote at the age of 21, in which I quoted St Augustine, as he agonises over the moral ambiguities and risks of acting as a judge. Writing to Paulinus of Nola in AD 408, he says this:
On the subject of punishing and refraining from punishment, what am I to say? It is our desire that when we decide whether or not to punish people, in either case it should contribute wholly to their security. These are indeed deep and obscure matters: what limit ought to be set to punishment with regard to both the nature and extent of guilt, and also the strength of spirit the wrongdoers possess? What ought each one to suffer? ... What do we do when, as often happens, punishing someone will lead to his destruction, but leaving him unpunished will lead to someone else being destroyed? ... What trembling, what darkness! ... “Trembling and fear have come upon me and darkness has covered me, and I said, Who will give me wings like a dove’s? Then I will fly away and be at rest”. [Psalm 55 (54):5–8].

But Augustine did not fly away; he sat on the judge’s bench and wrestled with the terrible moral ambiguities.

The terrible ambiguities of justice were brought afresh to my mind earlier this month, when I was in Normandy to guide a party of Americans around the beaches where Allied troops landed just over seventy-five years ago. We all know that as the beginning of the liberation of Europe from Nazi tyranny. But if it was just, it was flawed, human justice. It wreaked terrible destruction. It killed 37,000 French civilians. British and American troops were sometimes ordered to give no quarter. French Canadian troops massacred SS prisoners of war in cold blood. If it was justice, it was very rough indeed.

It was also tragic. The German military cemetery at La Cambe in Normandy tells visitors that it is “a graveyard for soldiers not all of whom had chosen either the cause or the fight”. That is true: many of the German soldiers facing the Allies on 6 June and the months following were conscripts from eastern Europe. Like my father, their lives had been overtaken by war.

When I was standing there at La Cambe I told my American companions a story from another German cemetery, this one 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 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 poignant, tragic
story. And from this story the exhibition draws the lesson that war is an evil that is always to be avoided.

Well, yes … but no. For one thing about which the exhibition is disingenuously silent, is 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 the undoubted evils of war, would have been to allow Hitler’s armies to do as they wished. But with what consequences? Not only 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? The Allies’ war against Hitler was full of moral ambiguity and tragedy. Its justice was very rough indeed, but it was still necessary. “What do we do when … punishing someone will lead to his destruction,” asked Augustine, “but leaving him unpunished will lead to someone else being destroyed?”. That’s the terrible dilemma. That’s the nettle. But Augustine grasped it. On another occasion he wrote: “In view of this darkness that attends the life of human society, will a wise judge take his seat on the judge’s bench, or will he not have the heart to do so? Obviously, he will sit; for the claims of human society constrain him and draw him to this duty; and it is unthinkable that he should shirk it” (City of God, Bk XIX, Chapter 6).

The victorious war against Hitler was a moment of grace, but a very terrible grace, one rife with moral ambiguity and tragedy. Remembering it, I feel grateful to have been spared it. I observe that even those fighting in the just cause did things to be ashamed of, which humbles me. And I acknowledge that the deaths of those fighting in the unjust cause were often tragic, which moves me to compassion. So: gratitude, humility, and compassion. In this way the child, who himself never witnessed the moment of grace, finds his life well-structured by the memory.

But there’s one more thing. When in Normandy, I took my party of Americans to visit the British and Commonwealth cemetery south of Bayeux at Tilly-Sur-Seulles. I took them there, because it’s where Keith Douglas is buried. Douglas, a former undergraduate at Merton College, is reckoned to be the best English language poet of the Second World War. On returning from Egypt early in 1944, he wrote a poem that contained this stanza:

And all my endeavours are unlucky explorers come back,
abandoning the expedition:
the specimens, the lilies of ambition
still spring in their climate, still unpicked:
but time, time is all I lacked to find them,
as the great explorers before me.

On 6 June 1944 Douglas landed on ‘Sword’ beach in Normandy. Three days later he was killed by a shell-burst in the trees above him. He was 24 years old.

“Time, time is all I lacked”. But I haven’t lacked time. We haven’t lacked time; we’ve been given it. Thanks be to God. Let’s use it well.