8 November 2020: Eucharist Sermon
Remembrance Sunday
1 Thessalonians 4:13–end, Matthew 25:1–13
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These are names engraved on the walls which we pass every time we enter the Cathedral; the names of students of this college who died in service in the armed forces. There’s an engraved stone in the Botanic Gardens in Durham with a line from the poet, Basil Bunting, which reads: ‘Words! Pens are too light; take a chisel to write!’

Carving a name on stone we make it something that is fixed, permanent, immutable; it is there to commemorate the one who is named across the ages and forever. Today we meet to remember together – to commemorate - those who have given their lives in war.

But it is not enough to simply gaze at a list of unvoiced names. Today, as in the weekly ceremony of the turning of the pages in the Remembrance Chapel, we give these names voice; reading them aloud, recalling them, repeating them, we bring them into our lives. For in speaking and listening to these names we too are writing and carving – not on stone, but on our minds and memories. Hearing the names, recalling their sacrifice, we impress them upon our memories, like a seal in wax. In this way we ensure that they will never be forgotten; that they continue to live in and for us; that their example is one that will shape and fashion who we are.
But we carry these names – these people – these men and women, not only in our minds and memories, but in our hearts. They are not simply an example of selflessness or bravery or courage which we might well struggle to comprehend, never mind to follow, but they are also part of who we are; for we are united to them not only in memory, but in love. For many the names are those of grandfathers or grandmothers, or now, more likely, great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers. For those who knew them, they were husbands and wives, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers and sisters, friends, lovers – or in this college, undergraduate and graduate students. They are fellow human beings, who share the same flesh and the same spirit as us. As the poet Laurence Binyon wrote, a few weeks after the beginning of the first world war:

‘With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns for her dead across the sea.
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,
Fallen in the cause of the free’

To the Fallen is a moving poem. It is better known for the lines which the choir sang in the Act of Remembrance at the beginning of our service: ‘They will not grow old, as we who are left grow old’. But the word ‘pride’ in the opening line jars for me: ‘With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children’ …as a mother, I simply can’t begin to imagine losing my son in warfare – flesh of my flesh and spirit of my spirit – and if I could, I suspect that ‘pride’ or ‘thanksgiving’ would not be the words that would immediately make sense of the life which had been torn from me. Like any parent, I would readily die to save my son and I suspect that when our soldiers went to war it was also more for love of their loved ones than for any other reason.

I mentioned earlier that we might struggle to comprehend, never mind to follow, the selflessness, bravery and courage of those who died in war - but I’m sure that they, too, struggled; that they were often conflicted, filled with fear, or sheer horror; that they were traumatised, broken in spirit, unable to make any sense of what they were doing. But that they overcame, or were given the grace to overcome, these very human reactions, and nevertheless bravely went into battle and laid down their lives, can, I think, only be comprehended by love.

I think of that well-known passage in the Song of Songs:

‘Set me as a seal upon your heart; as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it’
When soldiers joined the Roman army they were branded or sealed with a sort of tattoo on their arms, called the military mark. It was indelible, and whether they remained in the army or left it, they were marked out as soldiers for life. Augustine, the early Church father, uses the image of the military mark to explain the sacraments of baptism, marriage and ordination: in them the Holy Spirit imposes an indelible, unbreakable seal on our hearts which can never be broken – once baptised, married or ordained, the person remains so forever.

Like the impress of a seal on wax; or the impress of words and deeds on our minds and hearts; or the seal of the spirit in the sacraments; the seal of love in the Song of Songs is one that is indelible: ‘many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it’.

Love will remain.

But how are we sealed by love? I think that Christ gives us an answer when he says in the lesson we will read at Evensong this evening, from St John’s Gospel: ‘greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’. For we are created by God’s self-giving love; and when we turned away from Him, rebelled, sinned and rejected that love, he gave His only son to be sacrificed for us, to show us just how much he loved us and to inspire in us the love we had lost. The martyrs of the early Church, who faithfully followed Christ in the face of hostility and persecution, and died for their faith rather than renounce it, were celebrated and remembered as we now celebrate and remember those who died in war, those who laid down their lives, that we might live in peace and security. All bear the seal of love – an indelible seal which cannot be broken in life or in death. Today, remembering, repeating their names, engraving them in our hearts, we are called to follow the path of self-giving love.

An image of this sort of self-giving love was engraved on my mind as I listened to the radio recently and heard someone describing a war grave which had been unearthed in Arras. It contained twenty soldiers of the same battalion, the 10th Battalion of the Royal Lincolnshire Regiment, who had been buried with their arms linked with each other. I thought of those who had laid them out and what was going through their minds and realised that what they had done was a visible realisation of love. The living were uniting the dead as they also united themselves with them; dead and living were sealed with the unbreakable, eternal seal of self-giving love.

Commenting on the Psalms Augustine offers us an image of the bonds which unite human beings; of our mutual inter-dependence; of the ways in which we rely on each other and would perish without one another: it is a rather odd image of a herd of deer, who, when crossing a river, take
it in turns to go first, while the others follow, their heads resting on the body of the one in front of them, so that they form a sort of chain of mutual support and together cross the river in safety.

Today we unite ourselves with those who have gone before us; who are one with us; without whom we would have perished; and who will be there, when we have safely forded the river of this life, in the life to come. Today we not only remember their names, but we write them as a seal upon our hearts, united with them in a love which is eternal.

As Binyon concludes the poem I cited earlier:

For where our desires are and our hopes profound,
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known
As the stars are known to the Night;

As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain,
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end, they remain.