

Chapel Talk Monday November 18th 2019



A little over one week ago we gathered here in this chapel to remember the fallen, to commemorate those who served in the armed forces and who paid the ultimate sacrifice in order to defend our democratic freedoms and way of life. Remembrance Sunday is a moving ceremony – the plaintive notes of the bugle as it plays out the Last Post would surely melt the hardest of hearts. For me Remembrance Sunday is an opportunity to think about my grandfather and his brother, Walter and Albert respectively who fought in the Great War. My grandfather went to war in 1914 when he volunteered to join the British Expeditionary Force. He and my uncle fought in two of the great blood baths of that terrible conflict, the battle of the Somme and the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign.

Miraculously both men survived the conflict. They

were the lucky ones. Some 700, 000 British soldiers lost their lives in World War 1 and today war memorials up and down the country bear silent witness to that appalling toll. But what of those the other side of the barbed wire, Hans and Sebastian, Wilhem and Maximilian in their field-grey uniforms, huddled together for warmth in a flooded, rat-infested trench who, just like their British counterparts, had left behind their families and their homes in order to play their part in the war to end all wars. Do we remember them? Do we ever consider those that we have fought against as victims of war?

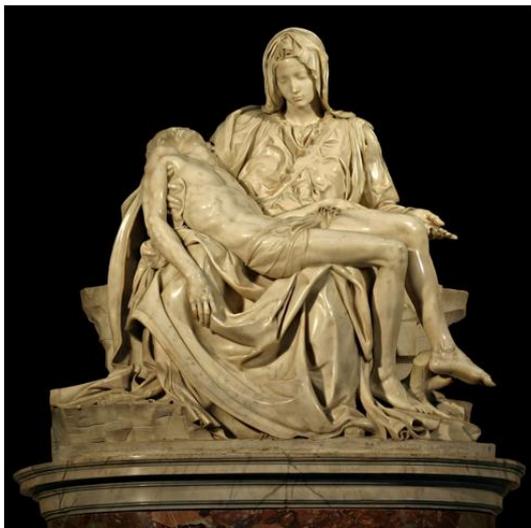
To answer this question I would like us to consider the work of a German expressionist artist, Katha Kollwitz who was born in 1867 on the easternmost edge of Germany, in East Prussia, in the city of Königsberg, neither of which now exist on account of the geopolitical convulsions of two world wars: Königsberg, the birthplace of the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant is now a Russian city, rebranded Kaliningrad. When the Great War broke out in 1914, Kollwitz supported her eldest son's wish to volunteer and to do his duty. Hans was 22 years of age. Meanwhile, her younger son, Peter returned from a hiking holiday in Norway in order to follow in his brother's footsteps. He was not yet 21 and so was not allowed to join the army without his father's permission. Peter's father refused until Katha Kollwitz persuaded him to let their son volunteer. A mere 10 days after leaving Berlin, Peter Kollwitz lay dead in a field in Belgium. Peter's untimely death changed and determined the rest of Kollwitz' life. Kollwitz became a fervent pacifist and proceeded to demonstrate against the war until its conclusion in 1918 by which time Germany had suffered an enormous number of losses, some 1.8 million people. Through her art Kollwitz gave voice to the sense of personal loss felt by ordinary Germans but she herself struggled to come to terms with her son's death.



Her first attempt at a memorial to Peter did not show him at all but rather two kneeling, grieving parents that are separated from each other and are isolated by their suffering; a husband, frozen in grief, and wife, bent-double in agony, unable to comfort each other.



It would take Kollwitz until 1937 before she could finally reconcile herself to the tragic loss of her son when she created her memorial to Peter, a wooden sculpture of an old woman, seated, her dying son lying between her knees.



Its inspiration was Michelangelo's Pieta, a statue group in St Peter's Basilica in Rome of the Virgin Mary cradling the dead Christ. However, Kollwitz' son is not like Michelangelo's Christ, presented to the viewer for contemplation or adoration. Nor, like Christ, is he draped gracefully over his mother's knees. Instead, he is almost totally enclosed by his mother's body. She does not show him to us but attempts to shield him, although dead, from further harm. The pathos of this futile gesture is extreme. For me, this sculpture, a mother trying in vain to protect her child, speaks as profoundly and movingly of the devastation of modern warfare as the poetry of Wilfred Owen and, through it, we witness the destruction of civilisation. As we were reminded last Sunday, in war there are no victors only victims. Thank you for listening to me.