REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY

Remembrance Sunday. Always the closest Sunday to Armistice day; a routine event when we repeatedly don our poppies and dutifully observe our silences to mark the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month when the guns of the Great War finally fell silent. It was a war of such previously unknown magnitude that back then it was not called WW1 as no one envisaged that people could ever go through such suffering again; it was called the war to end all wars, the Great War.

And that War certainly deserves its place in history and our remembrance. It was the first time that the gap between the romanticised perception and the gruesome reality of war became obvious to so many. It was a huge shock to the entire population, and everyone was affected. These were not only professional soldiers dying in far-off lands. These were ordinary fathers, brothers, children, civilians called upon to defend and save society as they knew it from an existential threat.

However, is Remembrance Sunday only to reflect on the events themselves, or could we reflect further and see what these events say to society today, about us? To keep this day meaningful, what freedoms do you think these conflicts have saved for us, and, more importantly, what will you do with what has been saved?

I can think of no better opportunity on Remembrance Sunday than to be in this Memorial Chapel, with its recently-added and stunning Cloister entrance, built originally to commemorate your predecessors who died in the Great War, where I sat as a pupil for many years myself, and to have the privilege of engaging with a group that is old enough to understand, mature enough to reflect and yet still young enough to do something about it!

We have our own, stereotypically British style of remembrance. It would be easy to stand here in my uniform, in front of all the militaria that you saw processed in at the start, tell you of the necessity for war and advocate the themes of duty and glory. But that is not my personal experience of war, and it would not have been the perception of those we remember. In truth, war is terrible; it is not the romanticised version that you see in Hollywood nor the humorous tv adaptations of Dad’s Army. We are not here today to celebrate victory in war, because truly no one wins in a war. But we are here to celebrate - and, in a moment’s silence so rare and valuable in this digital and connected age, we are here to celebrate peace. It is peace not war on which we should focus. In fact, all the War Memorials in the UK were originally called Peace Memorials, and it is only lazy language that has led us to associate them with the events of war rather than reflect on their true meaning.

Alongside peace, we are here to acknowledge the unity of all humanity; the exact opposite of war. Remembrance is an activity that should cut across all cultures, religions and nations. We must not focus only on the British casualties of war, but on all those who suffered and suffer today as a result of it. In doing this we recognise that we must rise above hatred towards any individual as an enemy and see the intrinsic value of each and every human being. As we heard in the reading from Ephesians “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but…… against the spiritual forces of evil”. These ordinary people we remember today did not necessarily fight because they hated individual people, but because what and who they loved was under threat. And it is the strength of that love that gives people the courage to stand between a threat and what they hold so dear, not hatred.
Those we remember today saw and understood that first-hand; and died as a result. Our remembrance of them highlights the universal moral significance of all human beings.

Most people know little about war, and I pray it continues that way, so we must use their experience rather than relearning this ourselves. Therefore, their legacy is not in flags and parades but in the future; in you, each and every one of you individually. As the first-hand recollections fade in distance and time, we use poppies and services as a way of prompting our thoughts, but it is what you do with these thoughts that is the most important point about today. You must reflect on what is important to you.

You sit here today with the freedoms of choice and participation that we hold so dear. You sit in a school that enjoys the shared values of respect for others, challenging selfishness and promoting independent thinking. These freedoms, as we remember today, were not bought cheaply, but they can sometimes be taken for granted. But what would you be prepared do if these, and the values we share across our society, were threatened? The country still needs those who continue to offer themselves, not just militarily but in every profession and walk of life, to stand up and defend these values. Future conflict is unlikely to look the same as the wars of the previous centuries, the world and technology move on, but we can imagine that it will be just as challenging in its own way. So, we have a challenge and a choice of what we do with those freedoms that others saved for us.

In making that choice, we can also reflect on the words of Jesus in St John’s Gospel; “My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”. It was not through hate that Jesus sacrificed himself for us, but through love. It is an example that we should follow by putting God and others before ourselves. It is an example that those we remember today followed through love and sacrificed themselves for our future. Throughout the Bible, God’s people are instructed to stop and remember what He has done for us, to pause and be grateful. Do we do this enough in our busy lives, or only today because we are forced to?

When I first joined the Army, and lively soldiers were not popular clientele in bars and pubs, I was taught a short rhyme by Rudyard Kipling that has stayed with me:

“In times of war and not before,
God and the soldier we adore.
But in times of peace and all things righted,
God is forgotten and the soldier slighted.”

It is clear that in the times of chaos, when we fear the unknown, we need our faith the most. But it is in times of peace and freedom of choice, when you are deciding what to do with what has been saved for you, that you can make a real difference…

So, what choices will you make? Are glory and success important to you? Does that mean pursuing wealth and celebrity, a drive for winning at all costs too often accompanied by a cynicism without the will to change anything and a dismissal of other points of view without fully understanding them? Or do you see glory and success as choosing the way of humanity, humility, hope and forgiveness? I hope that you will leave here having reflected on the freedoms that the sacrifices of others have bought for you, that you will be eager in debate, committed to justice and responsible for taking action; and that in so doing, you will put others first. This will not always be the easy path; but, supported by your family, your
friends, and your faith, you are assured of love through all the turbulent times; you are never on your own.

Some years ago the poppy appeal had the slogan, “The best way to honour the dead, is to care for the living” – Remembrance is only truly worthwhile if we do something positive with those freedoms saved for us. In short, if you want to thank those whom we remember this morning, live a life that honours their sacrifice. In that way, at the going down of the sun and in the morning, you will be truly remembering them.

Amen.