

Remembrance 2010

A few weeks ago Susan and I were at Sea World in San Antonio, Texas, awaiting the appearance of Shammu the killer whale. The display was entertaining, and very American. After a few words of welcome before the display began, the presenter said over the PA system: 'can I ask all the members of the military, all veterans, and all of you with family members in the military to stand. Now folks, let's applaud these brave and good Americans for their service and sacrifice to our great nation.' I was moved by that naked and open patriotism. It made me proud to be among US citizens, my granddaughter one of them. It felt good to be part of a community and a nation that shows pride in itself. And yet, there is something inside me that tells me that I shouldn't feel like that. I wonder why.

More images from last week. I was at a school where the Headteacher said 'Fr Stanley will be pleased to hear that you are going to be silent for a whole two minutes on Thursday.' And someone apologised for ringing me during the two minutes silence (even though I wasn't in). Why? I can understand why someone might feel that a member of the military would keep the silence, or that someone who had lost a relative, or a certain sort of politician, but why should people think that a clerk in holy orders should keep it, or that he would be pleased that infant schoolchildren should keep it? We can easily let occasions like today fool us into thinking that by being here, we have done our bit for peace. We sing the same hymns year by year, hear the same words and read out the same names. Why those two wars? Why not the Civil war? the Napoleonic wars? The Irish wars? What is the point?

I want to turn to the poppy. The poppy, the emblem of today, is the cause of the unwinnable war in Afghanistan. It is cause of much human misery in the world, for poppies give us morphine and heroin. Drugs that root us to the past and render us unable to plan for the future. It seems to me that rather than dwell on the past—which is what this service so easily leads us to do—we have to build for the future by acknowledging the foolishness of the past.

Many of us wear poppies today because the poppies of Flanders grew from dormant seeds brought to life by the churning up of the earth by the great war machine. Seed dormancy known to any horticulturalist. And in a similar way, when we are churned up it can lead to new life, new ideas, moving on. New life from destruction. The way to a better world begins, as charity so often does, at home, by fighting the evil within ourselves. I hear Christians talk about the faults of others as if the speaker didn't have any of their own. We've all been at bad tempered meetings—maybe even PCC meetings—where the basic problem is that someone wants his or her own way, and is completely deaf to reason or practicalities or the views of others. This is bullying. It is warfare on a small scale, and just as stupid. Is not this why all wars start: because some leader or nation thinks that they have the right to impose their will on another?

Warfare is right at the heart of the church's liturgy: Lord God of hosts (God of power and might in lamentable CW) – Sabaoth – armies, armies of heaven. Battling evil is part of our faith. But the battle has to start inside each of us. Warfare 'against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places'—that is, within each of us. We see Jesus engaged with this warfare overturning tables in the Temple where worshippers were duped into thinking that they had to pay for things in order to appease the Lord. Warfare against the delusions of the past. Destruction in the Temple courtyard to bring the oxygen of new life. Yes, new life can come from battle, from destruction. Blood carries oxygen.

When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow we gave our today.

These words bring tears to eyes and lumps to throats. And yet, ... did those brave souls really give their tomorrow for our today? In 1914 they were duped into thinking that the call of their country was the call of God. Sure, they saved us from the threat of their day—and we are grateful. But the truth is that war comes again, and whatever victory they helped to gain, it was a very fleeting victory. The vengeance that English politicians inflicted upon the Germans after WWI laid the seeds for the next conflict. And so it goes on. To and fro like the stupid playground game it is. And continues to be. Since then we have fought in Korea, Falklands, Palestine, Iraq and Ireland—this the stupidest war of all where the motive was, and remains, simply possession.

God bless those who fought and fight. God bless those who have suffered. God bless those who made others suffer. God bless those who were killed. God bless those who kill. God bless those who have suffered and died for their country. Let's honour the dead, but let's not romanticize warfare.

Jesus said: Love one another. Love your enemies. Love is hard work: taking care of, sharing, admonishing, tough-love, longing for something better, getting people to take responsibility for themselves, helping them to grow up. It means overturning the tables of pretence and hypocrisy, of false and easy illusions. As Desmond Tutu has shown us, it is not violent bludgeoning that is the way to reconciliation and peace, but the exposure of wounds. The message of Jesus calls to a relationship with each other, not to put our faith in weapons or rules. The real fight is a fight within me for my own soul, and within you for yours. There will never be peace without justice.

**Sing for God's justice disturbing each easy illusion,
tearing down tyrants and putting our pride to confusion;
lifeblood of right, resisting evil and slight, offering freedom's transfusion.**