

Remembrance Sunday 2014

Micah 6:6-8

Matthew 5:1-12

Monday evenings this summer saw me glued to the box, watching the training of Marine Commandos. We glimpsed them, we glimpsed their trainers, many fresh from Afghanistan, and we saw how duty and tough love are agents of transformation. It made me wonder what *our* future is likely to be, shaped increasingly nowadays by 'rights' and indulgence.

It was remarkable to witness as training went on how these men come together in the service of something bigger than themselves. They learn that individuality is subservient to the common good. They learn that their own preferences and desires count for nothing when it comes to the well being of the unit. They learn comradeship. When one of them fails in an exercise there is none of the derision that I suffered in PE classes at school (I was and remain physically inept) but instead a remarkable level of encouragement and support.

It's people and attitudes like this that we honour today.

Think about the men in the trenches a century ago. Maybe they signed up seeking excitement, maybe they were bored, maybe they had a sense of service, or maybe they were escaping desperate circumstances. Just like today's commando trainees. Think how dreadful life was in the trenches. And death. And yet, despite this—or perhaps because of it, for there's nothing quite like adversity to bring people together—we witness the comradeship and intimacy that develop, and we see it in ex-servicemen and -women.

Now think of the women and men who served in the Second World War, in the Gulf War, Ireland. Think of those serving at this moment: Afghanistan, the Middle East, and more. Think of servicemen and women who suffer in peacetime as a result of idiots who think they know better than everyone else. Think of those that are injured physically and mentally. And think of their families.

It is people like this that we honour today.

We're not here to honour politicians who appear to indulge in playground games like 'mine's bigger than yours' or 'you can have my soldiers if I can be your friend'. We are not here to condemn service chiefs who make decisions with the best of motives—or have decisions imposed on them. We're here to remember those who learn at first hand about justice, and mercy, and humility. That is what the first reading is about. And in the second reading we hear that only when we have emptied ourselves of selfishness can we begin to glimpse the kingdom of God—which is not about life after death, but about what life could be here on earth, as it is in heaven.

However much historians might proclaim the stupidity of the First World War, one cannot deny the evil that was confronted in the Second. Fighting evil is necessary, so long as we remember that every evil act begins as a thought in the mind—evil thoughts that are in your mind and mine as well as in the mind of the Dictator. It's worth remembering too that nowadays a UK military presence is often in place, in the words of the second reading 'to show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight,' selflessness replacing selfishness. That, brothers and sisters, is what Resurrection is about: we can all rise to the selflessness of eternal life if we put aside selfishness and ego.

My son and his family live in the United States. I'm always struck at US airports how military personnel are invited to board first, and how at shows and public events the military are applauded. Americans respect their military all year round. This week we show our respect for those who learnt the hard way that selflessness, not selfishness, is the way. It would be good if we could remember this message in the other 51 weeks of the year, every year, and in every moment of our lives. Before it's too late.