

## Micah 6: 1-9

*Homily at the Annual Commemoration Service for the Staffordshire Regiment at S Paul's Church, Burton upon Trent, 13 September 2014*

I have no military connexions other than a father-in-law who served in the Royal Navy, an uncle who served in the Royal Air Force and a father who served as a batman to a General in the British Army. Born in 1950, I am one of the pampered post-war generation who have never had to fight for anything and for whom everything has been free, including education to third level. What can I say to you who have served, to you who have suffered, and to you who have lost comrades, or confidence, or loved ones? What can I say to you who through your training learnt the hard way that personal preferences were irrelevant when you trained and worked together in the service of something bigger than you? What can I say to you who through all this were forced to think about justice and mercy, and who had a certain sort of humility drilled into you?

Although others have called me morally and intellectually courageous, nobody has ever called me physically courageous. I am a coward. I am always willing to stand right behind someone else, physically. So I need people like you who I can stand behind. I thank you!

I have been transfixed these last few Monday evenings watching the training of Marine Commandos. It is wonderful to see how in the service of something bigger than themselves these young men learn about justice and their attitudes to it, men who see by example when mercy is called for, and men who learn that their own preferences and desires count for nothing when it came to the wellbeing of the troop. When one of the company failed in an exercise there was none of the derision that I suffered in PE classes in school, but rather a remarkable level of sympathy and support. You might even call it prayer.

All this has obvious biological parallels in the cooperative communities of creatures like ants, termites and marine invertebrates, where each individual knows its place in the big scheme of things—a scheme of things that to each individual must surely be incomprehensible, but which must, one supposes, be hard-wired into what passes for a brain.

You men know what it is to have to put your 'self' aside for the sake of something bigger. In the church calendar, tomorrow we celebrate the Holy Cross. There is a tendency to think that the death on the cross is only about what happened 2000 years ago. This is nonsense. It is of course about that, but it is also about what happens every moment of every day as we gradually realize that the energy we spend in trying to be individuals yields altogether more wonderful fruit when we divert it into trying *not* to be individuals—when we give up 'self' for the sake of something bigger. That is what happens in your military training. At some point in the pursuit of individualism we will 'hit the wall', and, as in training, we can, if we set our face to it, break through into resurrection life.

Commemorations such as today's are ambivalent occasions. You know people who were injured, you know people who are still suffering, you know relatives who suffer, you have comrades who were killed. But you know the excitement, the comradeship, and the singleness of purpose as many hands are put to the plough.

I know some of you, having been at home in community, find it difficult when you leave to cope with the individualistic society that you find yourself thrown into, but I hope most if not all of you can look back with satisfaction on what you learnt in training together. Young men these days lack opportunities like this. There is nothing, or very little, set apart for them. We have organizations for women only, and women are certainly encouraged to be women, but men aren't allowed to be men, from early childhood onwards, for schools and society tend to emasculate. Society needs *more* opportunities for men to be men—I'm not talking about boorishness or the dreadful hail-fellow-well-met insincerity of golf-clubs where 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch your BMW'—but opportunities for the naturally occurring testosterone to be expressed in male bonding, adventure and service.

You, gentlemen, have a wonderful opportunity to help today's young men to learn how to be men, and to learn the benefits of working for a cause that is bigger than any individual. That perhaps is your job now: to show others how to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly.

Once again, I thank you and I commend you in your service, past, present and future.