

22nd Sunday of Year A(2014)
St Bede's – Commemoration of the Start of the First World War;
remembering the Fallen of the parish

The plaque in the porch which lists the names of the dead of the First World War from this parish (then the whole of Rotherham, and a bit beyond) is decorated, and the candle burns by it. Sixty two men died. Not many amid the millions whose lives were sacrificed in the carnage but each was an individual, a mother's son, a real person. As a Jewish saying has it:, “one death is the destruction of an entire world.” The names are copied onto the front of the service booklet; ordinary names, the like of which are sitting around us. Just ordinary people plucked from their modest, mundane lives who went in a noble cause to face terrors inconceivable.

I was born within a decade of the end of the Second World War, but it could have been a hundred years. It never impinged on me except for the picture stories of devilish Hun and merciless Jap getting their comeuppance from brave British lads on the pages of the Victor and Valiant comics. They appeared alongside the mighty Alf Tupper who ran and won many a foot-race against impossible odds, fuelled on fish and chips; and Desperate Dan whose staple-diet was Cow-Pie. It was all make-belief. That my parents each had a small part to play in that global horror-drama did not affect or concern me. And seldom did they talk about it. And if they had, would I as a child and teenager have been interested in listening? The survivors of the Great War were even more reticent about talking of their experiences. Some things are so horrible that we block them out. We prefer silence to raising the memory but if we don't tell then others do not learn; and the wretched cycle turns again.

My only individual involvement with military conflict was indirect, through my brother, Michael, two years older than me. He always wanted to be a soldier and practised on me. Eventually he got his way and signed up. He loved the life: the drill, the discipline, the spit and polish, the travel, the camaraderie. But he hated the tours of duty in Northern Ireland. Shot in the head by a sniper when on patrol in an inadequately protected armoured vehicle, he died on a street in Londonderry, calling for his mother. We have an echo of the same sentiment in the poem of Robert Graves which will be read towards the end of the service. It is an image, among so many others, that should challenge every politician as they consider sending men and women to war.

Paul VI, one of the great Popes of the post-war age, in October 1965, famously spoke at the United Nations,. To the assembled world leaders and ambassadors he cried: “No More War; war never again”. He quoted John F Kennedy, “Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind”. Paul VI's words were prophetic, and like many of the words of a true prophet they were ignored.

Jeremiah, whose agonised cry against God's injustice we heard as our first reading, Jeremiah was one of the first war poets; perhaps second after Isaiah of Jerusalem. He

lived and proclaimed God's Word at a time when war seemed imminent and then happened, with disastrous results for the rulers, the people, the land.

It was not as if there was no warning. A hundred years earlier Assyria had threatened the region. Poor choices by those in power meant that the northern kingdom of Israel was obliterated; Samaria its capital razed; its people deported to far distant parts of the Empire – and others imported to replace them. Thus the legend of the ten lost tribes of Israel was created. Some of the northern folk fled to Judah and Jerusalem, taking their treasures with them, including important writings, but the Assyrians followed. Their army laid siege to Jerusalem. Sennacherib speaks of keeping the king of Jerusalem shut in like a bird in a cage. Jerusalem was saved, either by a miracle, by disease breaking out among the troops, by a payment of an enormous tribute, by the army being called elsewhere, or by some combination of these; but Jerusalem stood.

The lessons went unlearned. When the mighty Babylonians, conquerors of Assyria, led by Nebuchadnezzar, threatened, the king wavered. Jeremiah was adamant in the name of God: accept the Babylonian yoke. He even wore a wooden yoke to show how it could be done. A false prophet, who would be dead by the year's end, broke it; and so, at the command of God Jeremiah had an iron yoke made and wore that. Still he was not heeded. One of the best accounts of the beginnings of the First World War is titled, *The Sleep-walkers: How the world went to war in 1914* (Christopher Clark, Harper, London 2013). Sleepwalking is an apt description of how many tragedies unfold.

Jeremiah cajoled, pleaded, threatened, acted drama, refused to obey God's first command to procreate but he was ignored, and when his voice was too shrill, nearly killed. His book is largely poetry, and filled with the horrors of the prospect of war. The poets of the First World War, woke up and realised the horror but far too late.

The triumphalism of the victors after World War I led directly to the rise in Germany of National Socialism and Hitler, and so to World War II. The division of the Ottoman Empire along lines drawn on maps which paid no account to tribal, ethnic, religious or any other factor save the interests of the great powers, along with the displacements of huge numbers of Palestinians when Israel was created, have led directly to the horrors we see in that region today. Sleepwalking into conflict has long and far reaching consequences.

As we remember our dead of a hundred years ago, we must also recognise the courage of those who would not take up arms. Those with pacifist principles that they would not compromise were abused, derided as cowards, imprisoned. Many who would not fight joined the medical corps and risked and lost their lives to aid and comfort casualties. Blessed are those who give such witness to peace.

The whole of the back area of this church, the porch and the choir loft and baptistery, was built as a memorial to those sixty-two dead of the first World War. More recently stained glass has been introduced into all but two windows of the church (the east and

west windows were already in place). In the middle window of the north wall (I speak liturgically, not geographically) is itself a further memorial to those and all the dead of the Great War. It depicts Christ, coming in glory, as priest, prophet and king. Behind him war rages, with fire and death and the trench warfare is depicted there. But the New Jerusalem is coming from heaven. Jesus promises a new heaven and a new earth, even as in the bottom corner, swords are turned into ploughshares; the tools of war become garden implements.

God, in God's time, will bring the new heaven and the new earth. Our fellow parishioners died to try to bring a new world order here below. How far have we honoured their memory by offering our lives as a living sacrifice to seek that new world?