

Remembrance Sunday sermon by Andrew 10 Nov 2019

At this time of year I always remember an aunt of mine who every Remembrance Sunday went down to Princes Street to plant her poppy in memory of my uncle, her older brother, who was killed in the last months of the Second World War.

But the recollection that really touched me, from all she said and all that she told me, wasn't so much about the grand scale of human history that we all learn about – battles and campaigns and all the rest; but the poignant ordinariness of it all.

My aunt's Dad, my grandfather, as some of you know, opened his butcher's shop on Stenhouse Cross in 1929. Ten years later he watched two of the boys from the shop, my uncle and another boy, go off to war. Neither came back. The other boy died on the beach at Dunkirk and his body was never found. Likewise, the hairdresser, from two shops down, also never came back; neither did the newsagent's son, from a couple of shops beyond that. These are losses of men who might have been old men today had they lived and whose children and grandchildren could be sitting next to us. Just a few hundred yards away in our own primary school there's a plaque to Thomas Hunter, a local boy, who again died in just the last months of the Second World War and won the Victoria Cross for his courage. He was twenty-two years old.

In the Resurrection Chapel of our Cathedral the walls are quite literally covered with the names of boys like these. Butcher's boys and hairdressers who never came back. Sitting in that chapel every day at morning prayer when I was curate, again and again I found myself wondering: how, in the name of heaven, did families and communities cope with losses like these?

Where, in the midst of all this tragedy, can we find a word of hope?

Today on television there'll be many camera shots of acre upon acre of military graveyards from all around the world, from Flanders Fields to the Far East. But I chose today's reading from Ezekiel as a kind of faith counterpoint *to* those pictures. We know that even today farmers in Belgium and northern France still unearth the bones of fallen soldiers, the nameless ones lost in the quagmire of no-man's land. But in Ezekiel's vision the bones of the dead are clothed in hope.

The Spirit of God breathes life and a new meaning into their sacrifice. God says: I will bring you home. Not to the earthly home they left, but to that home of promise and peace for which they longed. The men and women we honour today are at home in God, and they are at home in us who are the beneficiaries of their heroism, and the bearers of their faith and their hope for ourselves and for our children. The dry bones of all they lost and suffered are raised to new life in us. That's our honour and our responsibility.

And Jesus says the same in his Gospel. I will come to you and I will raise you up. The butcher's boy on the beach at Dunkirk, the young man or woman blown up by a land mine in Iraq or Afghanistan, all the people we see dying in the endless carnage of Syria, and all the lives consumed in the holocaust of war – none is forgotten by God.

One of the best and most realistic war films I've seen is one called "Black Hawk Down". It tells the story of an American helicopter crew of Army Rangers shot down in the middle of a rebel-held town in war-torn Somalia in the early 90's. The drama of the film rests on the soldiers' motto – "No-one gets left behind". So the whole story centres on the men's faithfulness to that promise. They'll do whatever it takes, take any risk, make any personal sacrifice to rescue those men trapped on the ground as hostile fire kills one after another of their friends and the enemy closes in. No-one gets left behind.

And that is also the central message of the Ezekiel reading and of our Gospel, it's God's motto if you like. Prophecy to those dry bones, I will bring you home – no-one gets left behind. The crucified and risen Son of God is the rescue mission of God's love. God enters the bloodiness of our world – a world under brutal occupation, a world of violence and fear – and takes the risk for us... and loses. It's an abortive mission, a failed mission. Jesus the Nazarene is just a casualty of war, a minor statistic in Pontius Pilate's report back to Rome. God's mission, as the world looks at it, fails.

Until for those who have eyes to see, the Risen Jesus stands again in the Upper Room and everything he ever said falls into place: No-one shall pluck you out of my hand; I will come for you – if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? So don't be afraid, I have overcome the world. Let not your hearts be troubled – no-one gets left behind.

The dream of God and the message of the Resurrection is that one day there'll be an end to those scenes of grieving Mums and Dads who've said goodbye to a beautiful, vibrant son or daughter only to get back, just a folded flag and a bedroom full of memories. Because the last word has yet to be spoken, and that word is God's. In the depths of the tomb, I believe that God raised Jesus by speaking his name. For with God there are no "unknown soldiers", and with God: No-one gets left behind. Amen.