



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Armistice: Debt and Hope

John 15:12-17; Isaiah 2:15; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Today is of course the 100th anniversary of the Armistice which ended the Great War. I do not propose to comment in detail of the causes of that war -it is a subject which is still debated by historians. We can see that there was a climate of nationalism associated with empire building coupled with a complicated network of military alliances which dragged nations into the war.

It was a devastating war. At that time NZ had a population of just over a million. We lost 18,058 people in the conflict and related deaths while a further 41,317 were wounded. That was almost 2% of the population killed and 4% wounded. It is estimated that the total toll across all nations was 16 million deaths and 37 million casualties.

Although, we often hear of the jingoism associated with the war, there were other contemporary voices.

Papers in Wartime Group

From 1915 significantly moderating views were expressed through the Papers in Wartime Group led by William Temple, later Archbishop of Canterbury. Its basic principles included:

- that the war is ... an outcome and a revelation of the un-Christian principles which have dominated the life of Western Christendom and of which both the Church and the nations have need to repent;
- that followers of Christ, as members of the Church, are linked to one another in a fellowship which transcends all divisions of nationality or race;
- that Christians are bound to recognize the insufficiency of mere compulsion for overcoming evil, and to place supreme reliance upon spiritual forces and in particular upon the power and method of the Cross;
- that with God all things are possible.

The theologian P.T. Forsyth had no doubt that the war represented a divine judgment, but on a much wider and far more profound level than would attach the blame wholly on any one nation, or vice. He wrote:

Patriotism is not religion. God does not love one nation at the cost of the rest. In His free grace, he is for nations only as they are for Him.

Now Thank we all our God

Later today we will sing the hymn “Now Thank We All our God.” It was written by Martin Rinkart, a Lutheran minister during the Thirty Years' War. The city where he pastored was overcrowded and suffered deadly pestilence and famine. Armies overran it three times. During the height of a severe plague in 1637, Rinkart was the only surviving pastor in Eilenburg, conducting as many as 50 funerals in a day. He performed more than 4000 funerals in that year, including that of his wife.

Yet in the midst of that suffering he was able to pen such words: Now thank we all our God. Gratitude even in the face of great suffering, grief and loss. Where would he have found the resources to serve and even to give praise? He had hope in the gospel.

Bugle Calls

In military funerals and remembrance services there is a powerful symbol of hope – it is in the bugle calls: The Last Post and the Reveille. You heard in the Epistle the reference to death as sleep and those who have died as fallen asleep. The resurrection is likened to waking up to the sound of the trumpet blast. Why would Paul and Jesus liken death to sleep? I think because the expectation is that a sleeper will awaken, and they taught that the dead will rise to life again at the resurrection.

The Last Post is of course the bugle call to tell the troops the day is over and they can go to their rest. The reveille is the wake up call. By playing them at a military funeral, on ANZAC day or Armistice Day, the symbolism is that death is a long sleep until the trumpet of God sounds and calls those who have fallen asleep to rise in the resurrection. Those bugle calls are a reminder of the hope we have of eternal life.

There is another piece of resurrection symbolism I have only recently understood. After the Great War a memorial was erected in London. It is inscribed, “The Glorious Dead” and serves as the National Monument to not just those who died in WWI but also subsequent wars. The architect chose to build a Cenotaph which means “empty tomb.” It serves to represent the bodies of all those who had died but subtly it reminds of another “empty tomb” – for one who rose from the dead.

The Christian hope is of the resurrection of the dead. We believe Christ rose from the dead as the first of all those who will eventually follow him. We have the hope of life after death. Jesus spoke of that eternal life when he met Martha the sister of Lazarus. Lazarus had been dead for 3 days and Jesus was about to raise him back to life. He said to Martha,

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.¹

First: *The one believing in me, even if he die, he shall live.*

The first death, simple mortality, is the death of the body but not of the spirit - there is life continuing beyond the grave.

Second: *Whoever lives in me and believes in me shall [literally] never, never die into the ages.*

The believer in Jesus will not experience the second death - eternal death – which is exclusion from God's presence a condition otherwise known as hell.

The other hope Christianity offers is of God's perfect rule of peace. This is what Isaiah 2 describes – in the Last Days God will judge between peoples and the result will be no more war but peace between nations. They will not even train for war any more. But note that it is not all left to the distant future, Israel is exhorted to walk in the light of the Lord. So there was the call to work towards peace even though our sin will cause wars to arise.

¹ John 11:

Greater love:

In 2006, I met a man at New Wine in England who had been the Heavy Weight Boxing Champion in the RN, had served in the SBS (Special Boat Service - the Naval equivalent of the SAS) and had fought behind the lines in the Malaysian campaign on six month long solo missions. I think you could say he was both brave and tough. I asked him how you teach men courage. His reply surprised me. He said, "It's love, in'it." He went on to say he had recently been to speak to SBS men in training at Portsmouth. He asked them what they really wanted in the mate alongside them when they went into battle. After they had talked about skills and strength etc, he said, "What about love?"

"None of that sissy stuff," they said.

"No," he said, "but don't you want someone who will defend you at all costs? Don't you want a mate who will risk his life for you?"

"Oh, sure, you've got to have that!"

"Well that is love," he said. As Jesus said, "Greater love has no man than he lay down his life for his friends."

The Armistice

On 11th November 1918, a cease fire was negotiated about 5am to take effect at 11am – the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.

When news of the Armistice reached New Zealand it was met with widespread thanksgiving, celebration and a lot of noise.

In 2005, a great flood of 2005 hit Carlisle inundating 2000 houses. The electricity was off for over 36 hours. Our church was taking hot soup to people. I remember being in a quiet street going from door to door. It was cold; it was getting dark. Suddenly, the street lights went on and many windows lit up and standing out in the street, I heard a spontaneous cheer come out of the houses. And we were cheering too – it was a good news after a hard weekend and we couldn't but exclaim.

In 1918, *The Evening Post* reported,

There were songs and cheers, miscellaneous pipings and blastings, and tootings and rattlings—a **roaring chorus** of gladsome sounds.

I understand that – you would just have to shout and cheer when such news came. That is what our government hopes will happen across the country again – that people will make a roaring chorus of gladsome sounds. For our part, we will ring the chapel bell and sing a hymn of gratitude after the observance at 11 o'clock.

Here we are one hundred years later, with our old church dedicated in memory of those who died for the Empire in the Great War. These words from *The NZ Herald* editorial of 13th Nov 1918 remind us of what we will remember as we stand in silent at 11am this morning:

Ours is a debt incalculable to all, dead and living, who have stood for us in "the imminent deadly breach". They have, by their shielding of us, made us all their next-of-kin. We cannot measure their sacrifice any more than they could gauge it; but their lost lives, their broken careers, their spent health, will make them the perpetual pensioners of our quickened affection."