

## Remembrance Sunday 2014: Troops from the Empire in WW1

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians he is writing to address a very particular concern – which is that the Thessalonian believers are gripped by a conviction that Jesus will return immanently to gather the faithful together. Jesus had promised that he would return, and at that time they believed that he literally would – but, they are concerned as to what the status is of some believers who have died already, before the return – are they saved or are they lost?! And so Paul says, that they are not to worry about “those who have died”, because through Jesus, “God will bring with him those who have died, at the coming of the Lord”. The sequence will be, that “the dead in Christ will rise first” and then those who are alive will be “caught up in the clouds together with them”. And what we notice here is that not only does Paul address a very specific concern and anxiety, and does so very effectively, but he also leaves us, aeons later, with a very compelling picture of the uniting of those who have died and those who are still alive in a single fellowship and communion.

If we listen to the full quote of 1 Thessalonians Ch.4 v 16-18 we catch the stirring, mystical quality of what is indicated. It is dramatic and inspiring; “for the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever ..... Therefore encourage one another with these words”

These are indeed encouraging words – and they have, of course, a very particular ring on this Remembrance Sunday, especially as we have just joined in the Act of Remembrance, and have been mindful of those who have died for their country in war or who have been the victims of violent conflicts over which they have had no control and had no reason to be party to. That we should be re-united as one human family within the purposes of God, provides a compelling, even comforting image of humanity reconciled, beyond our destructive, violent and endlessly embittered controversies and conflicts. And there is a sense in which this vision of reconciliation – and we have stretched the original sense of Paul's vision for the Thessalonian Christians to become a vision for all people as one human family – there is a sense in which, in this vision, we can begin to glimpse a way towards understanding how the distorted and fractured projects of humanity, that are pursued by nations, interest groups and disturbed individuals, are ultimately challenged and redeemed by the goodness of God and by the deeper and enduring purposes of God as humanity is restored to itself. Yet what we note, is that this reconciliation is only achievable or reliable in a domain beyond what is earthbound.

For in Paul's vision, it is only “in the air” and “in the clouds” that the separated believers come together: which points us to the recognition that ultimate reconciliation is only possible outside the constraints and incompleteness of the warring world as we know it. And this thought leads us into consideration of a recurring feature of Remembrance Sunday commemorations, which is that they are times of mixed feelings, perspectives and emotions. For on the one hand, we gather to pay tribute to the *commitment and sacrifice* of services personnel, and to the suffering and stoicism of the very many collateral victims of

war. And we recognise that for some this means re-connecting with very personal and sometimes disturbing memories, and we wish to demonstrate our deep gratitude and regard, and our solidarity with the continuing suffering, especially of relatives and colleagues. And this we are pleased to do.

On the other hand, at Remembrance time we are conscious of entering another arena, which is one of *corporate self-questioning*, around the rights and wrongs of taking up arms, of going to war, or the very contemporary and urgent issue of whether or how we should be involved in other peoples' conflicts, and the many issues that rise up in the connected areas of ethics, politics and ideology ... And so remembrance time has at least these two sides to it.

And in connection with this tension between remembrance and debate, I expect I am not alone in having much appreciated two recent Radio 4 programmes, out of the many World War One feature programmes that have been on radio and television, entitled "Soldiers of Empire", which told the story of the very significant involvement of forces from S.E. Asia – in particular, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma – in the first world war. For one of the features of these two short programmes was their highlighting of both the huge contributions and sacrifices of S.E. Asian forces in World War 1 and the reality of mixed feelings that were at issue for those who once took part in what was significantly a European conflict. The programme researcher and presenter Shantam Das estimated that 1.5 million from S.E. Asia served in the British ranks, 900,000 as combatants and 500,000 as non-combatants, and one million of these were on the Western front in France and Belgium in WW1. For as soon as war was declared in Europe, the then Governor General in India declared that India was at war too, and so a massive campaign to recruit sepoys, or soldiers, from the towns and villages began, and was legitimised. The British authorities made effective use of both their colonial power and also local traditions that disposed those with military backgrounds or from martial traditions to enlist to fight. And, as we might expect, there was division between those who were proud to step up and fight for King and country, strange as it might seem for us now, and there were those who resisted and felt that the leverage of empire was being forced on them. And apparently women were at the forefront of protests, especially when forced conscription was introduced late in the war, when the losses to British Forces had taken a very heavy toll and reinforcements were desperately needed. The Punjab was the area most heavily recruited with Muslims and Sikhs and Hindus joining up to fight. Approximately 200,000 Muslims, 90,000 Sikhs and 80,000 Hindus all from the Punjab went to the Western Front alone. Among the Bengalis, from Calcutta and present day Bangladesh, where martial traditions were less prominent, many were recruited as non-combatants including many doctors, translators and stretcher-bearers. Bengalis were also among the most vocal in their protests. Traditions of revolutionary politics in the region spilt over into anti-engagement protest. And Shantam Das described how single families would include both Anglo-phile sympathisers with imperial service and ardent Indian nationalists. As in so many contexts, wars and conflicts are capable of dividing families, among their many other impacts.

It is a salutary story that is painted here of how British colonial power was able to mobilise these Expeditionary forces from across the globe. Apparently there were times when Indian

troops held one third of the British line on the Western front, and there were 10,000 Indian casualties in the first year of the war. And for those who have been to New Delhi, you will know that the contribution and sacrifice of these forces are memorialised in the very impressive monument of India Gate.

One of the present day impacts of this South East Asian story is of course to strengthen our solidarity as modern day white and Asian Britons, and especially in our city of Birmingham. There are of course parallel stories to be told of the contribution of Caribbean forces especially in World War 2, and also African forces. Therefore, notwithstanding the very significant oppressions and violations of empire, which cannot be overlooked, since over succeeding decades the empire has come to these islands, so our shared wartime engagements are, I think, a piece of shared history that has something potentially very positive to bequeath to us. In terms of our present day solidarity as fellow travellers and fellow citizens, this warrants greater attention and public recognition.

What we are also noting here, is that within this story of S E Asia and the First World War, there is this (inevitable) element of contestation – what I am calling ‘mixed feelings’. No chapter in the annals of war, it seems, is without it. And this ambiguity is, I think, very interestingly reflected in the prophesy of Amos in our first reading. For when Amos is bringing a word from the Lord to the rulers of the Northern Kingdom of Israel it is not at all clear whether “the day of the Lord” that is coming, is something to be welcomed and embraced or something to be feared. There is intense uncertainty as to whether God is going to act for good or ill! And so we find the prophet declaring, “Why do you want the day of the Lord?” “It is darkness not light!” And what is spoken of here in relation to the “day of the Lord”, which is a time of God’s judgement in the book of Amos, could quite easily be said of the “day of the Lord” which is a decision to go to war – for is it more likely to plunge us into the darkness or might it lead us into the light? And as we contemplate the possibility of further British engagement in Iraq or in Syria even, this is a sobering thought to have in mind.... It is surely of the nature of war and conflict that it is often very hard to be clear where the moral high ground is to be found, if anywhere, and there will always be debate, contestation and division.

I trust then, that this morning we can find space and place for our remembrance to be both thoughtful, sympathetic and respectful as well as being an opportunity to rehearse some of the pertinent issues that attach to this occasion, of history, morality, politics and ideology.

What Paul also reminds us of in his vision of humanity reconciled, is that in our remembrances and our reflections upon them, we are actually caught up in a bigger journey towards a place where not only the living and the dead are re-united but also in which, in the purposes of God, enemies become fellow citizens in a new community of dignity, humanity restored and respect, distant as this may appear. Let us live and work for the hastening of this vision through our relationships, our actions and our prayers. Amen

9<sup>th</sup> November 2014

Reverend Julian Francis