

WITH BANDS OF LOVE
Trinity X
31st July 2016
Sung Eucharist
St. Michael's Cornhill
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These past three years have seen so many commemorations of the centenary of the Great War. The service and gathering remembering the Battle of the Somme is but the latest. The terrifying losses and the appalling conditions and suffering endured mean that no commemoration can finally do justice to the near collapse of European civilisation at that time. Lord Grey of Fallodon's memorable words: 'The lights are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime' captured the atmosphere and the appropriate foreboding felt across the entire continent.

Travelling across the channel – doubtless avoiding Dover at the present moment - perhaps the most potent reminder of all this is the remarkable monument to the Canadian fallen on Vimy Ridge, just north of the town of Arras. Vimy Ridge is the first serious upland encountered when motoring away from the coast southwards. On that hill, the trenches and tunnels have been retained. You can even walk through some of them. Trees and grassland have softened their edge, but still they tell their tale. Towering over all this, is the powerful statue or sculpture of Mother Canada weeping over her lost children. The memorial park has been given to the people of Canada as part of Canadian territory by the people of France. On the attached monument are carved the countless names of young (often teenage) soldiers and armies who died, as they believed, for our freedom.

The entire location on Vimy is a tragic and almost ironic memorial of human selfishness and avarice. None of those commemorated here were citizens of Europe. Ironic, since none of them lived in our continent. None of them had any immediate issue with the politics that had led to war. They had come and given their lives in solidarity for the mother country, even for the then fast waning British Empire. The war cost Canada a vast swathe of that generation of its young men.

In Europe itself, the tragedy remains equally inexplicable. Some of us, in our history lessons, will have studied 'the causes of the First World War.' In logical terms it is still hard to plumb the reasoning. Instead one needs to dig a layer deeper to the basic human instincts and behaviour behind the tragedy. At root was a contagious selfishness and jealousy, played out in a crazy arms race – and made the more dangerous by the fact that the Ottoman Empire was experiencing the final symptoms of decay and rigor mortis. Selfishness is perhaps the most dangerous and even cancerous of all human vices and sins. None of us is immune.

The nub of this is captured most movingly in that great classical Old Testament passage which we have just heard from the prophecy of Hosea. So we heard:

'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son....
I led them with the cords of human kindness, with bands of love.'

Israel's response to this was an all-consuming selfishness, a thirst for power, so the prophet warns: 'They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king...' so the oracle continues. But the dénouement is ultimately one of unbounded hope: 'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My compassion grows warm and tender . . . and I will not come in wrath.'

This note of God's endless generosity is a recurring theme in Scripture. For Christians, it reaches its climax in the gift of God himself in Jesus Christ. So we hear from

the letter to the Colossians: 'If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above. . . 'We are being renewed through Christ and the climax runs: 'In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.'

All this is very powerful stuff at a time when we have seen political shifts little short of earthquakes. Many recriminations have been passed to and fro. The young blame the older generation for these turns of events. The old complain that the young are apathetic and will not engage or even vote. Then, there's the shocking behaviour of Sir Philip Green, buying his third £100 million yacht while thousands of workers stare into a bleak future, and struggling elderly people buy the scraps from the master's table in the BHS terminal clearance event and sale.

But the heart of this lies deeper, and it's very fortunate that we have the Young Freemen among us today, for they represent future hope. How might they display the generosity which is seen ultimately in Jesus Christ and in his ultimate self-giving? We really do look to you.

Let me move, then, finally to the gospel passage in which we see that generosity is shown not only in solidarity but in individuality too. It's a story of one rich man, a sort of first century Philip Green. So, in the reverse of that mood I conclude with one simple story. Charlie is a successful, fairly well-off provincial businessman in his early sixties. Just a few years ago some distant family of his were on holiday in Greece. One night their accommodation burnt down and the two children – perhaps ten and fourteen – were instantly orphans. Charlie and his wife took them into their home. They became parents again later in life. It was costly in the extreme. Their life was constrained, their pleasures limited, but they gave their all. Generosity is a costly business.

Charlie and his family were good church people, but now they had to step up to new and ever unfolding challenges. It is a most powerful and encouraging tale. The children flourish again, albeit in their sadness. Charlie and his wife put out 'cords of human kindness, with bands of love.' As St. Paul put it in our second reading: 'They sought the things that are above, where Christ is. . . ' Their generosity is a mighty challenge to us all.

Amen.

Readings

Hosea 11. 1-11

Col. 2. 1-11.

Luke 12. 13-21