

Remembrance Sunday 2018. Canongate Kirk.

Of all the First World War commemorative services and ceremonies I've been privileged to take part in during the course of these last four centenary years drawing gently to a close today, one of the most poignant was on the steps of the Scottish National War Memorial high up within the confines of Edinburgh Castle on the eve of the centenary of the outbreak of the Battle of the Somme. Waiting there as darkness fell, you couldn't help wondering how the soldiers felt as they waited and wondered exactly a hundred years before, more or less to the hour, waiting for dawn and the sound of the whistles that would summon them up over the top and wondering which of them would survive the day. In a little while I shall be standing again on the steps of the Scottish National War Memorial specifically to commemorate the Armistice that finally brought the war to an end exactly a hundred years ago, more or less to the hour, when soldiers waited for the sound of the guns and wondered if they really had fallen silent at last.

To my mind one of the great features of the Scottish National War Memorial is that it was not entirely a brand new building, but fashioned by the great Sir Robert Lorimer out of a barrack block. It wasn't opened in its new configuration until 1927, which means that in 1918 it was still a barrack block, and I know that standing on its steps later I shall be thinking of those soldiers who returned to it a hundred years ago and of those who did not. There are two things worth noting about army barracks. Firstly they are places where soldiers live, where they sleep, store their kit, undergo inspections, places where they laugh and banter and argue and complain, places where soldiers **live**. And secondly they are places where **young** soldiers live, the more senior ranks would have more spacious accommodation elsewhere in the garrison, but barrack blocks are where young soldiers live cheek by jowl, brothers in arms, friends and comrades, places where young soldiers live. So it was out of a place where young soldiers lived that the war memorial was created, a fitting place to remember the young soldiers who died.

*Here dead lie we because we did not choose
To live and shame the land from which we sprung.
Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose;
But young men think it is, and we were young.*

AE Housman's epitaph takes us to the battlefields and the cemeteries and to the crosses row on row, but come back for a moment to the barracks, as those soldiers did who survived the war and returned after the Armistice, back to barrack blocks and family homes but all too conscious of those they had left behind.

*There's a grief that can't be spoken,
There's a pain goes on and on,
Empty chairs at empty tables,
Now my friends are dead and gone.*

The voice of Marius in Les Misérables, the musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's classic novel which itself is reckoned in France to have the status of a national monument, echoes the words of Laurence Binyon, whose famous lines already uttered in our Act of Remembrance are followed by these

*They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;
They sit no more at familiar tables of home;
They have no lot in our labour of the daytime;*

They sleep beyond England's foam.

England's foam, Scotland's foam, it's the same sea, the same sacrifice, the same empty chairs at empty tables in barrack blocks and family homes and village pubs and city churches. There but not there.

*When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain,
Thy touch can call us back to life again,
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.*

Another French tune, but this time a note of hope, rooted and grounded literally in the Gospel of resurrection, like wheat that springeth green, like poppies that flourished red in the wastelands of the western front where they were killed all day long, accounted like sheep to be slaughtered. In his letter to the Romans St Paul does not leave it there and neither should we. "No," he insists, "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord". Today of all days, there at last is a victory worth proclaiming. And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever.

Amen.