CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

Pentecost 25, November 11, 2018
Remembrance Day: 100th Anniversary of the end of World War I

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Canon in Residence

Faithful God, you hear those who call on you in trust and comfort those who mourn: hear us as we remember those who fell in the roar of battle and died in the mire and clay of the trenches; hear us as we remember those who survived the battles but returned wounded in mind and body; hear us as we remember those who mourned the dead and the loss of homes and communities. May the nations united today in sorrow find a single voice to sing a new song of peace, hope and freedom for the sake of your world and the advancement of your kingdom in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.[1]

Prologue

When I returned as a Fellow and Tutor to my College (Trinity) in the University of Toronto, I was assigned an office in an area of the college known as "Angels' Roost" (which will give you an idea of how many staircases there must have been to get to it). When you arrived at it you were inclined to mistake its door for that of a broom closet, and indeed when you opened the door you realized that it was probably too small for brooms, mops, and pails. It had a desk, a chair, and a second small wooden chair for the tutees to sit in as they read their essays aloud. It also had a nice leaded window which looked

[1] Prayer from the Church of England 2016 Memorial Service for those who died in the Battle of the Somme, 1916.

out directly on the great memorial tower built to commemorate the fallen soldiers of the Great War who were students of the university when they took up arms. Each year on this day hundreds would gather at that tower at 11, 11, 11 to remember in prayer, song, and speech, the sacrifice of so many; we do well to emulate them.

While in our country this day would finally morph into "Veterans' Day" in thankfulness for the service of all who served in our many wars, it will always be Remembrance Day, Armistice Day, just as our Memorial Day, which reaches back into the nineteenth century, will be when we place our flags on the graves. These are the somber days of our memorializing, and they must serve to remind us of the preciousness and fragility of peace. As we gather today, we still make and threaten war.

I

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
Matt. 5:9

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.

If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.[2]

My wife, Rita, and I happened in late Spring of this year to be in Shrewsbury, England. We were staying with a friend who is the musician of St. Chad's Parish there, and he was showing us around the building. I noticed a dot of red on a plaque a little way's away. Curious about it, I went closer to find that it was a large memorial plaque to the parish's war dead of the Great War, WW I. The dot of red was a single Remembrance Day poppy adorning a single name. The name was that of Lt. Wilfrid Owen. I was stunned, and my mind went immediately to his most famous poem, "*Dulce et decorum est,*", and to its most famous line, which he never translated from the Latin, *Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori.* The date of his sacrifice was two weeks before Nov. 11, 1918.

DULCE ET DECORUM EST

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.
Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,

[2] War Poetry Website.

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori. [3] [Sweet and proper it is, to die for one's country]

II

The wonderful Toronto and Oxford historian Margaret MacMillan in her second massive work on WW I, *The War that Ended Peace*, reminds us in the epilogue to that work of just how horrible it was. She writes, "By the time the war ended on November 11, 1918, sixty-five million men had fought and eight and a half million had been killed. Eight million were prisoners or simply missing. Twenty-one million had been wounded, and that figure only included the wounds that could be measured."[4] The U.S. lost about fifty-four thousand from its Expeditionary Force, but that does not count the very large number who died of the Spanish Influenza epidemic on the transport ships bringing them home.

[3] War Poetry Website. Wilfred Owen. Thought to have been written between 8 October 1917 and March, 1918
[4] *The War that Ended Peace*. p. 636.

What we now know is that the horrible carnage which was the Great War, WW I, would not prove to be the force that pushed us towards a lasting peace; quite the opposite. It would be the beginning of the bloodiest century in the history of humanity, and it appears to be a century that is extending into the next.

The United States was a very late entrant into the war. Many argued that Europe was a long way from home, across an ocean, and we had little reason for entering their conflict. This same attitude would be voiced and prevail right up into 1941 despite the best efforts of many of our leaders to come to the aid of our European allies. Then, suddenly, we found ourselves fighting a war on two fronts, a war in which four hundred thousand American military personnel would die. In my boyhood, as one born eight days after D-Day, "remembrance" was very real. Not since the Civil War had so many of us died in combat. It is an overwhelmingly sobering statistic to note that by the time all the dust had settled, and all the tyrants of the two great wars were dead, so was three percent of the world's population.

These two poems, the first by a Canadian, Lt. Col. John McCrae, a senior medical officer with the Canadian forces, was a call to arms and patriotism spoken by the dead to the living. It would become, in its time, the most famous poem written by a Canadian, though some thought it was propaganda. It was also written in the light of one of the first chemical attacks in the history of warfare. The second, the very famous work of poet Wilfrid Owen, written two years later, comes to us from the soul of deep skepticism. How can we keep saying to young men (and women now) that this is a noble and worthy task when we know that it is all too often an exercise in greed, frustration, and powerful political wills? Owen was one who went for all the right reasons, and found those reasons wanting. Yet he, too, has a poppy next to his name, a poppy renewed so that it is always clean and clear. Certainly, all of us here who remember the Vietnam war, remember this profound tension, the struggle to be a patriot, the agony of being a righteous skeptic.

At the end of the first world war the peacemakers' treaty failed miserably and literally set the course of European history in the direction of another war. In Russia one failed royalist government gave way to a revolution and finally to an unspeakably despotic set of dictatorships. Nations not before known came into existence with names that resonate deeply with us today, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria . . . Germany was in tatters, the Kaiser abdicated. The Balkan states came together to form Yugoslavia; the Czechs and Slovaks did the same. Poland emerged; the map of Europe and the Middle East was redrawn.

On this Remembrance Sunday we do well to remember that beatitude "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God". More than remember them, the peacemaking children of God, we do well to emulate them, to place peace in our hearts where the voids of pessimism have been hiding. We have come through a very mean political season in which demonizing advocates of ideas and attitudes other than our own has been rampant; thinking ourselves people of good will, we have set aside the peaceful, and we have even hinted at letting slip the dogs of nuclear war. God in Christ Jesus is calling to us, in our time, to make the legacy one of peace and not war. It is not an easy task; indeed, it is far harder than relying on a technology that could outstrip the deaths of the last century in an hour.

I think there no better way to conclude this somber reflection than to return to Professor MacMillan, return to the very last three sentences of *The War that Ended Peace*. ". . .if we want to point fingers from the twenty-first century we can accuse those who took Europe into war of two things. First, a failure of imagination in not seeing how destructive such a conflict would be and second, their lack of courage to stand up to those who said there was no choice left but to go to war. There are," she writes, "always choices."[5]

[5] Ibid, p. 645.