

Remembrance Sunday 2009

Called one by one to follow Christ- to follow in his footsteps living a life that has at its centre God and which is shaped by commitment, obedience, sacrifice and service. Each one of us treads a different path and for each one of us life will bring different demands, expectations and challenges. As individuals we try to respond each according to our deepest beliefs and to the best of our abilities.

Many of the men who signed up in the First World War, believed that they were defending God and country – they believed it was their duty to fight. During World War One, 230 soldiers perished for each hour of the four and a quarter years it continued. There were 70,000,000 men and women in uniform - of that number one-half were either killed, wounded or became prisoners of war. In the First World War, 703,000 British service men and women were killed and 1,663,000 were wounded. Half of the dead have no known grave. When men realised that they could not and would not go over the top of the trench to shoot the enemy – they were themselves shot by their own command. Inhumanity piled upon inhumanity. Conscientious objectors died carrying the wounded and the dead.

In the Second World War, men protected their wives and families from an evil regime and fought to save Europe from dictatorship. In the Second World War just under 400,000 were killed and nearly as many wounded. This time, conscientious objectors driving the ambulances and removing the bodies of the dead were treated as comrades in death- buried side by side in identical graves- each serving selflessly in their own way.

British forces have been engaged in military and peacekeeping activity every year since the Second World War except 1968: In order - Palestine , Malaysia, Korea, Kenya, Cyprus, Suez, Aden, the Yemen, Borneo, Dhofar, Northern Ireland, the Falklands, The Gulf, the Balkans and Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Iraq and Afghanistan. What are we to make of all of this? How does it fit with: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; Do not seek revenge; First go and make peace with your brother before you approach the altar? Finally, of course, where is God in all of this?

Well....I don't believe that men and women who sign up to fight for this country do so with the aim of making carnage and creating a hell on earth. They go to fight when directed, in order to serve others so that the worlds of different peoples can be better places. They are there to defend the weak and put themselves at risk peacekeeping in war zones. Of course, war is a lot messier than this and the innocent get killed and huge mistakes are made. In trying to mend parts of the world we can so easily create more political fault lines. Clearly a Christian war can never be an excuse for revenge and the Anglican church has always insisted that the cost of the war must be outweighed by the good achieved. It's a difficult area and there have always been Christians who have argued that it is not possible to categorise violence into the justified and the unjustified. Many Quakers sign up to a testimony, in which, whilst they cannot guarantee to never kill, they commit themselves to living day by day as if it were possible always to defend what we value and to resolve conflict without deliberate harm - in such a way that if damage occurs, healing is possible.

War can make it difficult to believe in God. If there is God, then why does God allow war to happen? But God never did create war, human beings create wars and humans- they try to solve them. God is a God of peace. Our human frailties and limitations should tell us that without God it is not possible to build a better world. So is there any hope? Even in the horror of war: God is there. Just as the agony of Jesus being crucified was real to God, so he looks with compassion and anguish at our struggles on earth. He hears our cries for justice and peace and is with us as we each struggle to create peace. Only by allowing ourselves to receive his healing power can we become whole and work towards peace with others, recognising that we and all peoples are God's people.