

## Sermon: 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II

Sixty years ago the greatest conflict the world has ever seen was ended. The bells rang out all over Europe in thanksgiving for our deliverance. We need to be reminded what we were delivered from. A Fusilier fighting near Trieste wrote this note:

*There were Germans still hiding in the area. I told the Italian partisan leader we'd be grateful for any prisoners they could get. He grinned: "Ah si, si. Prisionieri!". I knew that, after what he and the locals had been through at the hands of the retreating Germans he was not in the mood for taking prisoners. Half an hour later there were shots from down by the river. All the Germans had been shot.*

*The partisan leader, still grinning, brought me the paybook of the German officer who had been in command – now dead. He had tried to escape. "Molto stupido. Molto stupido" said the partisan. I opened the paybook. The German officer's name was Hauptmann. His picture might have been a propaganda shot for a chief SS man. Deep set eyes. Hard thin mouth. Cheek crossed with duelling scars. Sleek yellow hair. The square German head of the ideal Nazi type. This man had been in the SS from the early 1930s. His list of decorations filled a whole page at the back. That paybook was full of photographs of storm troops and of his sisters in white blouses and dark skirts. A heavily built father with close-cropped hair. Of other young SS officers with the same relentless faces. This was the type Hitler had released on Europe: brave, desperate, efficient. And now he had come to his end in an Italian field, shot by an Italian farmer's boy with a Sten gun. Shot in the back as he tried to escape.*

The suffering of the war was not meted out selectively. Whichever side you were on you paid for it. A German woman, survivor of the Battle for Berlin wrote:

*There was only one water tap, streets away. People were gunned down by the snipers as they went for it. We queued at three o'clock in the morning in steel helmets outside the bread shop. Russian low-flying wooden biplanes machine-gunned women as they stood in the queue. The artillery bombardment poured on the city relentlessly from three sides, above it the rattling of machine guns and the whine of bullets. Deserters' bodies were everywhere hanging from lampposts and trees. Boys as young as thirteen. The scourge of our district was a small one-legged Haupscharfuhrer of the SS who stumped through the streets on crutches shooting anyone he didn't like the look of. In the cellars starving people flung themselves like beasts over one another, shouting, screaming, struggling to lay their hands on whatever scrap of food they could get...*

And then there was the balcony at Buckingham Palace and King George VI, shy, saintly, courageous. And the other members of the Royal Family. Churchill with his hat off, cigar and the usual sign. Down the road at Trafalgar Square sailors and girls up to their knees in the fountains. All the usual glorious and squalid signs of deliverance. And it *was* a deliverance. But at what cost? Hundreds of thousands of our men and allies dead, many more badly injured. A continent of cripples and amputees, many shell-shocked, inwardly ruined, half-crazed. Widows and orphans. The great cities of western civilisation piles of rubble, stench, rats, starvation. And in England, depression, austerity, shortages, rationing, deprivation and cruel winters. What had it all been for?

You, your fathers and grandfathers had given everything to save Europe from Hitler's overweening, all enclosing tyranny. Hitler was a man in charge of a movement – an evil and efficient machine – for the destruction of millions by mass slaughter, gassing, burning by Blitz and industrial crematoria. And it was not just people who were destroyed. People are embodied belief, morality and a way of life walking. Civilisation is not something stored in museums. Civilisation is men and women. Culture is not art galleries. It is men and women free to laugh and sport, to enjoy the calm possession of their souls, to worship. Hitler's war was a war for the destruction of all these things - of Christian Europe, Christian institutions and all those free offices for the support of free people.

And you, your fathers and grandfathers were not called once, but twice. First the Nazi tyranny had to be defeated. And then our armies were required as a bulwark against the larger evil of international communism, state enforced atheism, the totalitarian anti-humanism of the gulag, of the suppression of the peoples of eastern Europe for a further generation; and terror and genocide used thoroughly as the instrument of state policy – and on a far greater scale than even Hitler dreamt of.

So when the soapy modern clergy bang on about what an evil thing war is, you can tell them you know that already because soldiers are the ones who are called to fight it. And you can reply that, though war is certainly a great evil, there are greater evils. And the greatest evil of all is the attempted destruction of customs and values based on the truth. Truth. Nothing less. And this truth is not some airy assortment of abstract principles. It is eternal truth revealed by God in his commandments, in the Law and the Prophets; and supremely in the love that he shows for us in giving us his Son Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Remembrance, Armistice Day, is not a piece of dusty recollection. Remembrance is thanksgiving. Thanksgiving for those who gave their lives. It's a glib phrase. But think of it and what it means: to give your life is to give everything. You have nothing else to give when your life is gone. And those who gave their lives were not numbers, masses, hordes. It is tyrannies and evil empires which speak of numbers, masses and hordes. It is satanic despots such as Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot who reduce human beings to statistics of the expendable.

But Remembrance – our thanksgiving for the sacrifice of the fallen and for our deliverance – goes even further and deeper than this. There is evil in the works of the great dictators and those who would enslave humanity. There is the tendency to turn from God and follow the corrupt devices and desires in all our hearts. You know I'm speaking the truth, telling it as it is – for you have only to examine your own conscience. We all know we have left undone those things which we ought to have done and done those things which we ought not to have done.

And as we were delivered from Hitlerism and Stalinism, we are delivered from the weakness and inclination to wrong which is in all of us. Our deliverer in this case is the Lord Christ. He laid down his life. He made the supreme sacrifice. And it was all for your sake. He is risen. He was vindicated by God and sits at God's right hand on high. Thanks to the sacrifice of Our Lord we are vindicated too. We who are fallen in sin, no less than our comrades fallen in battle, shall be raised to live with Him...

...to whom alone belongeth the victory with all power and might, majesty, dominion and power now and forever. Amen