

Sermon delivered at Holy Ghost Anglican Church, Genova, Italy on November 13, 2014

“The British Empire ever remembers together with her own fallen sons those of Italy who gave their lives in the Great War 1914-1918.”

On Thursday this week Penny and I attended the 2014 Remembrance Day service at Bordighera cemetery in Bordighera. In this quiet and peaceful place 72 British military personnel lie. They lie there in death as brothers and sisters of the other British military personnel who died in World War I and who are buried in other places in this beautiful country of Italy. Each British military person buried here in Italy is a very powerful symbol of all the British military that have died in conflicts around the world since the beginning of time. Our thoughts and prayers of thanks extend from those buried in Italy to all of the some 800,000 British military personnel who died in World War I...and also to the nearly 400,000 British military who died in World War II. And to the approximate 4,000 British military who have died in military conflicts since 1945. And we will never forget the 37 million civilians killed in WW I and the 60 million civilians who died as a result of WW 2. And the many civilians who died in wars thereafter.

We must remember that behind those statistics are real names and real faces of grandfathers and grandmothers, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, neighbors, mates from school. They sat next to us in the church pew, attended schools with us...or our children, and lived in our neighborhoods. They are more than mere statistics and talking points. Every death is not only a loss to a family, but also a loss to our communities and a loss to the nation. We must never forget their efforts and their sacrifice.

And when we hear of war or see it first hand, along with the destruction it brings, we may shout out, angry at God. “Why do you allow this to happen, God? Why don’t you do something about it?” And we might not like the answer we get back from God. “I did do something about it. I sent you.”

Those British whom God sent lie in the graves Penny and I visited on Thursday. The brave British lie in the graves I visited last year in Norway where I was the British chaplain on Remembrance Day. These brave British lie in many other cemeteries around Europe and around the world. Each person benefitted the whole world. "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends" (the Gospel of John 15:13).

It has been said that people are the sum of their memories. Some of you came here today with memories of men and women who are now active in

military service. Some of you bring memories of civilian life during wartime, or the memories your grandparents shared. Each of us brings different memories and thoughts to Remembrance Day. That is what makes Remembrance Day so comprehensive.

I was born in 1942. My very first memory in life I can pinpoint in 1945. I can still picture my parents' extreme happiness that WWII had ended. Friends were coming to the house. I will never forget the happiness and the tears of joy that abounded in our parlor all day long in the small town where we lived in central California.

In the U.S., those of us who were never in the military...never experienced the horrors of war first hand...right outside our door. Some of you DO remember war first hand, for you have served your country in the conflicts of today. You know of the bomb shelters in Great Britain where perhaps you or your grandparents had to stay. Lights out at dusk so your home would not be an easy target. And for you, my brothers and sisters, I pray this will never happen to you again.

Can anything good come from war? Let me tell you about Anglican Bishop Leonard Wilson. On 8 December 1941 Bishop Wilson was imprisoned by the enemy. The country in which he was captured is not important. No country formerly known as an "enemy" is mentioned in that context in this sermon. We are friends today, and we will remain friends forever.

The conditions inside the prison where Bishop Wilson was housed were indescribable. They were so crowded that the prisoners could not even lie down. There was no bedding or coverings. They were forbidden to talk. They had no water, except from a loo. No soap and no change of clothes. Bishop Wilson lived like that for 8 months. Along with other prisoners, he was tortured brutally. Many who were tortured died. It was a miracle that those who did survive, remained sane.

The bishop wrote, "After my first beating, I was almost afraid to pray for courage, lest I should have another opportunity of exercising it...and when I muttered, 'Forgive them', I wondered how far I was being dramatic, and if I really meant it. I looked at their faces as they stood around, taking turns to flog me. Their expressions were hard and cruel, and some of them were evidently enjoying their cruelty.'

After the war, Bishop Wilson went back to England. Two years later he was invited to return to the country where he was captured...to do a Confirmation service in the cathedral. As the candidates came forward, he felt a wave of fear sweeping over him. His eyes encountered the eyes of one

of the most ruthless and sadistic of his torturers coming forward to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, from hands which still bore the marks of torture that he himself had inflicted. The one-time torturer knelt before the Bishop, who placed his hands on the candidate's head and repeated the words of the ancient Confirmation prayer:

'Defend, O Lord, this thy Child with thy heavenly grace, that he may continue thine forever; and daily increase in thy Holy Spirit more and more, until he come to thy everlasting kingdom. Amen.'

After the service, the Bishop and his one-time torturer met. During their conversation the Bishop's torturer revealed what had brought him to Christ.

'Each time I tortured you,' he said, 'you prayed that I might be forgiven. At first this made me angry, and then it made me curious. Eventually your prayer brought me to Christ.'

As God's power and love lived in Bishop Wilson in his dark and painful days and as God's power lived in those British soldiers, none of whom died in vain, so may God's power and love live in us and all whom we meet.

As we look around this church at the different faces from different lands that perhaps used to be at war, we ask the question, "Is the work finished that was begun by each member of the military who fought? Are things getting better or not?" In other words, are we doing the job God gave us, namely to be peace makers and not conquerors?

Many doomsayers will tell you things are getting worse. That sells newspapers and ups the ratings of the TV evening news. But when I contemplate where the world was when I was born in 1942 and where we are today, I believe God has been hearing all those prayers for peace from literally many billions of people over all those years, and that we have been listening to God.

When I was a child growing up, I could travel to the moon about as easily as I could travel to most of Europe, to Japan, to Russia. Today things are dramatically different.

Lastly, I pray you will see the Bible for what it is. It is more than just a book of memories. In it we are reminded how GOD wants us to live. The rules that God has given us for living are not rules to curtail our joy in life. Quite the contrary. They are given, as Jesus said, so that we may have life and life in abundance (Jn 10:10). Try and imagine playing a game of football with no rules. It would be chaos! So it is with us when we fail to remember the rules of life that God has given us. Jesus gave us two great rules to govern

life in our world. The first is this. To “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind (Mt 22:37). The second is to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39). Let us go from this Remembrance Day Sunday resolved to make these commands the goal of our lives.

The poet George Santayana once said: "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Let us be THE generation who learns from our history.