

## Remembrance Sunday 2017

### St Marylebone Choral Eucharist

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

We all know that there are times when words are just not enough.

When a longed-for child is born – or dies – when a feared diagnosis proves to be terminal; when a unjust prison sentence is remitted – what do we say?

Whatever words might form on our lips, we know as we form them that they will be inadequate or trite. We know that whatever we say, it simply won't do.

At times such as these, the times when we feel we should say something yet can't find the right words, the best option is, of course, to say nothing, but simply be present, to stay with the person to whom we wish to speak, to share a precious moment that will always be filled not by what is spoken but by what is said without words.

Remembrance Sunday is such a time.

Whatever words are spoken today – as we recall the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month 99 years ago – they are going to prove to be woefully inadequate if not grossly inappropriate.

How can anyone put into mere words the desolation of Flanders, or the experience of a man with lungs full of mustard gas lying in the filth of a bombed trench? How can anyone put into mere words the untold agony of a mother receiving into her hands the telegramme that she knows will tell her of the death of her only child?

It is on days such a Remembrance Sunday that we can, perhaps, find comfort and solace not in the words of preachers nor verses of scripture or stanza of hymns, but in a silence which lasts for precisely two minutes.

The two minutes of silence is, of course, not two minutes of emptiness or nothingness, but two minutes filled with pregnant, palpable memory; almost tactile imagination - two minutes of contrition, forgiveness, pain, relief, resolve, thankfulness - and a thousand and one other emotions besides.

Yes, the silence is packaged about with music and hymns and by words, words which many people can recite from memory, but these things are not what it is all about: it is about the silence.

The music and the hymns, the sermon and the readings only serve to hold the silence, to protect it and frame it, so that it is the silence, the two minutes in which nothing is spoken, no music played or words sung, two minutes during which nothing is done, that everything, in fact, *is* done; everything *is* said: two minutes in which everything happens.

It is perhaps for this very reason that Lutyen's Cenotaph, which stands just less than a mile and a quarter from here in Whitehall, is such a powerful and profound piece of sculpture.

In a sense the Cenotaph says nothing: it is little more than what appears to be a monolithic block of Portland stone, 35 feet high and weighing 120 tonnes.

The names of those who died during the Great War are not inscribed there; there is no heroic frieze of men or the weapons of war; not a single battle is listed. The Cenotaph simply is! A place of presence and holding at the heart of a nation.

It is perhaps the stone's very silence which speaks loudest to us; which speaks more clearly perhaps than any other memorial in any other nation to the abhorrent horror of war and the depths to which fallen civilised, sophisticated, educated, faith-filled peoples can sink.

When it comes to the most harrowing or the most uplifting moments of being alive, less will always prove to be more.

What we need is not words, but silence; to be held in a safe place:

*... the silence in the mind is when we live best,  
within listening distance of the silence we call God.*

*This is the deep calling to deep of the psalm writer,  
the bottomless ocean we launch our thoughts on, never arriving.*

*... a presence, then,  
whose margins are our margins;  
that calls us out over our own fathoms.*

*What to do  
but to draw a little nearer to such ubiquity by remaining still?<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, R. S., *Collected Later Poems*: Counterpoint, 1990