



St Marylebone  
Parish Church

## Remembrance Sunday 2019

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

A year ago, on Remembrance Sunday 2018, we gathered to remember not only the dead of two world wars and those who had died in conflict since 1945, but the centenary of the Armistice signed at Compiègne which, at “the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month” was designed to bring to an end the hostilities which had engulfed Europe through four long, dark years.

Remembrance Sunday 2019 marks the eightieth anniversary of the beginning of a second war in a century that would engulf not only Europe in a war but north Africa, the Pacific and much of the Far East; a war which would, once again, for the second time in less than 30 years, draw the United States into a conflict, the origins of which lay thousands of miles from its shores.

There are many historians who recognise that the Armistice, whilst it did silence the guns in Flanders, did not bring an end to the hostilities of 1914 - 1918.

Indeed, the war of competing ideologies which has shaped and scarred so much of the final decades of the twentieth century - and the opening decades of the twenty first - and which has evidenced itself in acts of brutal and indiscriminate terrorism around the world, can be seen as having *its* roots in the railway carriage parked in a siding deep in the forest of Compiègne and in the splendour of the mirrored halls of Versailles which followed on from “the war to end all wars”.

In her epilogue to "Wounded: From Battlefield to Blighty"<sup>i</sup> Emily Mayhew reminds us that no-one survived the Great War unscathed.

*“The wounded had their scars, as did the men and women who cared for them – although theirs were less easy to see.*

*The country as a whole had been wounded.*

*The war was like a lesion on the collective brain of the nation. The lesion was a cruel condition; there was no memory loss; instead, there was too much memory – for the soldiers of their wartime experience, for the families of the loved ones they had lost. Everyone had lost someone – husband, brother or son, neighbour, workmate or pal.*

*But it wasn't just the dead who were mourned. Many of those who made it home were lost too, pale shadows of their former selves, unable to explain what they had suffered to families who would never be able to understand."*

How do we ‘understand’ war? How do we make any sense of the two great wars of the twentieth century and the wars and the international terrorism of the twenty first?

We can, of course, never “understand’ war; we can never rationalise or systematise the most heinous of mankind’s actions by “understanding” them, by analysing or dissecting them.

Perhaps this is why, when Christ taught his disciples to pray in the midst of the confusions and trial of their lives he taught them to pray not “*help us to understand as we ourselves have been understood*” but “*forgive us as we have been forgiven*”.

Erik Varden, the former Abbot of Mount St Bernard and now Bishop-elect of Trondheim in Norway, has written this<sup>ii</sup>,

*“When Christ formulated the commandment to forgive sevenfold – a tariff that, in Matthew’s Gospel is squared and multiplied by ten – he not only set a firm ethical standard; he effectively cancelled a curse that had weighed on mankind since the beginning of time.”*

At the end of Genesis chapter 4, there are 26 verses which describe the explosion of post-lapsarian violence that begins with Cain killing his brother and ends with some terrifying couplets spoken by Lamech five generations later. As Hebraists point out, these words are among the most ancient in the whole of the Old Testament.

Lamech's brutal words detail the escalating potential for lethal vengeance developed by his son which has proved, all too sadly and seemingly inevitably, to be a universal pattern.

Varden quotes from a letter he received from Aleppo in the winter of 2016,

*“Moreover, I do not understand why they have to fight during the night. Perhaps it is because night is the setting most appropriate for this senseless war. It is in darkness that the king of this world reigns and lays down his law, which is violence.”*

This is the incomprehensible world Man has made and in which we choose to live. But it is also the world into which Christ Jesus has been born: the world he has redeemed through his obedience and inevitable suffering inflicted by the descendants of Cain; the world in which the Christ was betrayed, tried and executed by us, the sons and daughters of Lamech.

At the very heart of this service on Remembrance Sunday, stands an altar surrounded by poppies, and there, in an eternal action, we enact the ‘mystery’ of Christian faith: the mystery which,

*“enacts the multiplication of pardon [the putting before the world another way, a way that is not the way of Cain or the sons and daughters of Lamech] another way to be truly and fully human”, Christ's way, the way of the Prince of Peace who brings not sympathetic well-meaning ‘understanding’ or the*

‘revenge’ of Cain, but healing and reconciliation through his birth, obedience, death and resurrection – the way of God’s limitless forgiveness for us who get it wrong time after time and time and who do not seem to be capable of learning from our oft-repeated mistakes.

Sunday by Sunday, week by week, day by day the Church takes bread and wine in memory of Christ Jesus, so that, as St Ignatius of Antioch said as he approached his martyrdom at the turning of the second century, in order to share “*the medicine of immortality, the antidote that prevents us from dying and causes us to live for ever in Jesus Christ*”.<sup>iii</sup>

Today, as we do every time we break bread and share the cup of wine, we approach the altar not as consumers of some “*arcane prophylactic*”, but as participants in the event which brings salvation once-for-all; the event which brings us forgiveness and from which we go out fed and forgiven and we pledge to do likewise in our paces of work and leisure, in our homes and among our friends, in our business dealings - and in our dealing with our foes and our enemies.

Maïti Girtanner, a veteran of the French Resistance, rescued in 1944 by the Red Cross from a Nazi torture base on the Spanish border, transformed her captivity by praying for and forgiving her torturers.

Christ’s commandment to “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*”, “*to forgive as you have been forgiven*”, resonated in her and although her fractured, broken

body never let her forget what she had suffered, she was able to break the seemingly inevitable endless cycle of violence and retribution and punishment and death so forcefully enunciated by Lamech so many millenniums before

We can never ‘understand’ war, but by and through and in God’s grace, we can learn to forgive, as we have been forgiven, to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us; to break free from the seemingly relentless cycle of violence-which-meets-violence and which, in the process, mars the image of God in us.

Maïti wrote<sup>iv</sup> that *“forgiveness does not come about in the abstract; it calls for someone to whom it can be addressed, someone from whom it can be received”*.

We come to this holy table, where bread and wine are taken and blessed and shared in remembrance of the One who lived and died and who lives again God’s eternal pardon - not as devout *observers* but to the place where we can begin and continue to rebuild our shattered, broken lives; the place where we can rebuild the life of our broken, hurting divided world; the place where we can learn to forgive because here is the place where know ourselves to be forgiven. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup>Wounded: From Battlefield to Blighty, 1914-1918, Emily Mayhew, Vintage, 2014

<sup>ii</sup> The Shattering of Loneliness, Erick Varden, Bloomsbury, 2019

<sup>iii</sup> The Epistles, St. Ignatius of Antioch, P A Boer Sr. (Ed.), Veritatis Vplendor, 2012

<sup>iv</sup> Mème les bourreaux ont une âme, M Girtanner, 2006, quoted in English by Varden, op. cit.