

Address: The Parish of St. Mark, South Farnborough. Choral Evensong for Remembrance – Marking the Centenary of the end of WWI and the Rededication of [the] restored WWI Memorial Chapel.

“Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

- John 15:13

FRIENDS, it is a great privilege and an honour for me to be present with you this afternoon, and to give this address, as we gather and as we pause to remember, and give thanks for, the countless servicemen and women, who across the past century have given, and continue to give, their all in the service of humanity – that is, so that you and I might enjoy freedom. In particular, on *this* remembrance weekend, we keep the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War; the Great War that was intended to end all wars. Today as we gather, in solidarity with so many thousands of people all over the world who are also *remembering*, we know all too well that the ravages of war, and of man’s inhumanity to man, are thriving and that far from living in a world of blissful stability and peace, we continue today, as throughout this past century, to rely on the bravery of the men and women of our Armed Forces, and of our Police and Security services at home too. Indeed, as we sit here in relative comfort we know that *they* are fighting those who would do us grave harm; *they* are seeking that universal peace which remains allusive.

Yet, in this house of prayer, we remember that we are a people of great hope and hope is essential to the collective and individual human spirit. As the Swiss moral philosopher and poet, Henri Frederic Amiel, wrote over a century ago, *‘At bottom, everything depends upon the presence or absence of one single element in the soul - hope. All the activity of man, all his efforts and all his enterprises, presuppose a hope in him of attaining an end. Once kill this hope and his movements become senseless, spasmodic, and convulsive, like those of someone falling from a height.’*

If Amiel’s insights are true, then we gain some insight into the powerful force that enable our servicemen and women, past and present, to go out to face danger in order to defend our values; to stand for the dignity of all people, especially the most vulnerable; and to refuse to give in to those who espouse evil. According to Amiel then, we might say, those in the trenches of the First World War, and of subsequent conflicts, who day-after-day had to find a

strength to stand again and fight on, reached down into the depths of their souls to find hope, even when hope must have seemed remote.

And, it this same instinct for hope that prompts us today to joyfully honour the memory of those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in the service of peace. This is because on Remembrance days we don't look back at those whose lives were lost and consider their deaths, or the destruction of infrastructure, as images of defeat. Instead, on days like this we reach down into the depths of our souls, acknowledge their sacrifice, and embrace hope - a confidence over the rights and wrongs of our plans and our actions towards our neighbours and, indeed, to the natural world we inhabit and wish to pass on to our children. So, I wish to suggest to you today that beyond the physical weapons of war, hope is the real munition of war; hope is the field dressing of those injured in war, and hope is the consoling balm of those bereaved by war. Hope animates our deepest desires for peace and for human fulfilment, and hope gives us the drive to reach out to lay claim to them.

Jesus in the Gospel today highlights that love is the common vocation of all people. To love one another is to live authentically according to our human nature. We are designed, programmed, for love – to give love and to receive it; to spot and to react where love is defiled or denied. *So* powerful is our human response to the absence of love that, like Jesus who died on the cross in order to reveal to fullness of love, and to provide a remedy for failed love, we too are drawn to remedy failed love in our world: To have the belief that we can indeed inspire love, a love that is infectious, we rely hope – a pearl of great price. Hope motivates and sustains us; hope tells us that love is about meaning and purpose, is about others and about the future. In making the bold statement that we are built for love, the Gospel reveals the true and sacrificial nature of love. In other words, if we truly love, we invest our whole selves in the act of love. Saint Mother Theresa of Calcutta, when asked how far one should go in loving others, said, “*Until it hurts!*” Remembrance then is about acknowledging in others the reality of a love expressed by thousands upon thousands, *until it hurt.*

In rededicating this beautiful WWI Memorial chapel today, we make an act of love for those lost, demonstrating the unending relevance of their actions. And, far from being by-standers, we who are gathered, are all implicated in this act of love, rededicating ourselves to *their* cause; the cause of peace. In doing so we embrace, and witness to, hope; the hope our forebears fought to gift us. This is because this chapel recalls with great dignity the sacrifices

of the Great war, and yet through the lens of hope, we see clearly beyond death and destruction, which though real and tangible, do not, and will not, have the final word. Here, in this place, we are invited to place our sadness and our fears at the feet of the Lord of Life who never abandons us, and then to step out into the world and to live lives that are rooted in love and respect; that are committed to tolerance and mutual concern. To do this *is* to honour the memory of those lost in the First World War, and conflicts since; to do this *is* to stand in solidarity with those who hurt most; to do this *is* to stand against evil.

Let me conclude with the words of Harold Nicolson, British delegate to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, “*We were about preparing not Peace only, but Eternal Peace. There was about us the halo of some divine mission. We were bent on doing great, permanent noble things.*” May each of us, in our own ways, embrace hope and do likewise. AMEN.

Reverend (Squadron Leader) Dave Skillen RAF
Saturday 10th November 2018

We will remember them