

The Temple Church  
Remembrance Sunday, 8 November 2009

Sermon by  
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I suppose that there can be few better places to talk about Remembrance. This ancient church was founded by the Knights Templar – we remember them by those graven effigies at the west end - with their own hard-edged military tradition. It was terribly damaged by bombing on 10 May 1941, and was then lovingly rebuilt. In one sense it was built for war, and it has certainly been marked by it.

But of course the story is more complicated. In October 1642 you could have sat here and heard, away to the east, those flat drum rolls and the squealing of fifes as the City of London's trained bands marched out to Tyburn, and then on to Turnham Green. There they formed up in rank and file, merchants and prentices, porters and ale-house keepers, across what is now a decidedly modern townscape (Turnham Green station was just behind their left flank) to face the King's army in the greatest unfought battle in our history. Without the City's extraordinary contribution it is impossible to see how Parliament could have won. There are, perhaps, some of you here today who might wish that it had not. So let me simply say that, either way, the lawyer turned military officer was essential component of the armies on both sides of the conflict. Just over my right shoulder is a memorial to a gentleman who was created baronet by the king for his valour 'at Edgehill fight,' so there is no doubt whose side he was on.

Much later, in the 1790s, the Bloomsbury and Inns of Court Volunteers trained to meet the threat of invasion by Revolutionary France. There was even a regiment of volunteer cavalry (in what was perhaps not the horsiest part of the

kingdom) which contained so many barristers' junior clerks (then known as lawyers' devils) that George III christened it, at a review in 1808, the Devil's Own.

Both the Inns of Court infantry battalion and the Inns of Court Yeomanry served in the First World War, and were reorganised after it. Even today you can still encounter their proud remnant, not far from here, in Stone Buildings, as part of our much-attenuated Territorial Army.

My first point, then, is a simple one. In this place we are in the very heart of a particular sort of military tradition, of men who, across the centuries, laid aside wig and gown to take up pike, musket or rifle when their country needed them. Shakespeare's Henry V described soldiers like this the night before Agincourt.

We are but warriors for the working-day  
Our gayness and our gilt is all besmirch'd by rainy  
marching in the painful field;  
There's not a piece of feather in our host -  
good argument, I hope, we will not fly -  
And time has worn us into slovenry:  
But by the mass, our hearts are in the trim.

So much for place, and all that it means. In one sense time is easy. On Remembrance Sunday we continue a tradition begun by His Majesty King George V on 11 November 1919, a tradition which has been increasingly well-supported of late, and which marks our profound respect for the men and women who have died for their country in war.

But in another sense there could scarcely be a more difficult times to talk about suffering and Remembrance, for we are in the middle of a long-running and controversial war. It is no mere figure of speech to say that as we sit here British servicemen and women are risking (and, dare I say) losing their lives in Afghanistan.

This is neither the time nor the place for a lecture on strategy, or for lengthy animadversions on the complexities of counterinsurgency campaigning. I will spare you in church what I would gleefully bombard you with in the lecture theatre. But we do need to look at our moral compass. A lifetime as a professional historian and amateur soldier has left me in absolutely no doubt that war is brutal, shocking and supremely wasteful. Moreover, there have been times in our history – even in our quite recent history – when it has been unjust or unnecessary.

But equally, there have also been times when war has been both unavoidable and just. The Second World War was fought to stop a monstrous evil, though the process of winning it raised complex moral considerations, for *ius ad bellum* (why one goes to war) does not necessarily define *ius in bello* (the way one fights). It also seems to me that we were right to intervene in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, just as the Australians were right to intervene in East Timor. In contrast, intervention in Rwanda would have saved tens of thousands of lives, and when the history of our times is written the West will deserve strong criticism for doing nothing as people died. Suggesting that Rwanda's neighbours should have acted, or that intervention would have raised complex issues of post-conflict governance seem to me to miss the point.

There is no easy absolutist line that defines when force is good or bad, right or wrong. But there are times when, as moral human beings with a responsibility to others, we simply cannot avoid it. The American philosopher Michael Walzer, certainly no bellicose neocon, puts it in a nutshell.

And it isn't enough to wait until the tyrants, the zealots and the bigots have done their filthy work and then rush food and medicine to the ragged survivors. Whenever the filthy work can be stopped, it should be stopped. And if

not by us, the supposedly decent people of the world, them by whom?

The 17th Century French savant Blaise Pascal wrote that justice without force is a myth, and ultimately I think that he too is right. Of course, this raises thorny issues of its own: whose justice, and what force?

If this were not challenge enough, we are also presented with the inescapable duty of ensuring that if we do intervene, we stay on long enough to ensure the existence of stable governance. In short, our plans must of necessity include not just war winning but post-conflict stabilisation too. This does not necessarily demand the construction of a form of government that we ourselves might welcome. For instance, in the Afghan context an attempt to create a liberal, multiparty central government in our own model is doomed to failure. We have no moral obligation to attempt the impossible, but we should have the wit to recognise the impossible when we confront it. One good test of humanitarian intervention is how long the intervention force intends to stay, and with what purpose. On the one hand we have neither the right – nor, indeed, the stomach – to re-establish empires. But on the other, setting departure dates and then leaving regardless of the situation on the ground is a certain way of encouraging our opponents to hang on in there. And to expect somebody else to pick up the burden after we have dropped it is sheer self-delusion, and there is enough of that about.

We are now too well aware that military intervention, even if undertaken with the best of intentions, places servicemen's lives at risk. Unless we accept this, then we should never intervene in the first place. Death and wounds are now, as they have been since long before the Trained Bands trudged off to face their king on Turnham Green, the currency of war, necessary or not, just or unjust. When I was Colonel of my Regiment I saw my dead soldiers flown back to the UK. This year a particular friend was killed in Afghanistan, and I have recently written a

supremely difficult letter to another friend whose boy has lost both legs. So I do not say this lightly: but we need a sense of perspective. Our worst year in Northern Ireland cost us 146 soldiers die, and three years of fighting EOKA in Cyprus saw 355 servicemen and dependents killed. Soldiers know that theirs is a dangerous job, and we demean them if we think that risk will break their spirit, and we will render all their efforts fruitless if our morale collapses while theirs holds firm.

There is one more painful truth tucked into this. In an abiding sense soldiers – just like those mail-coiffed figures over there - are both victims and executioners. Albert Camus told us that we cannot kill unless we are prepared to die: today, of all days, we ought to remember that. What General Sir Rupert Smith has memorably called ‘War Among the People’ cannot be won by long-range missiles or killer drones – or, for that matter by helicopters or armoured vehicles, however much we might want these latter from time to time. What will be decisive is the personal – and thus risky – engagement of individuals, not only in combat but in a whole raft of activities, some of them not remotely martial. Conflicts like that in Afghanistan are not won by killing all one’s opponents, but by a long and infinitely difficult process of addressing both governance and development within a carapace of military security. Our current weakness lies in strategic definition, in recognising the necessarily complex interplay between justice and force, in assessing what a heterogeneous coalition can legitimately expect to achieve – and then telling people (here and there) precisely what this is.

All of this puts today’s serviceman just where politics so often leaves him. At the point of danger, wrestling with obdurate terrain and a cunning enemy, with the notes of an uncertain trumpet summoning him forward. We might usefully wonder what he or she makes of us. We still expect private charity to step in to help him when public obligation falters. Our failure to understand what servicemen actually do – how long is a tour or

duty, how big is the army, what is a platoon – encourages a mood of febrile sympathy, in which that slide-show of young faces on tomorrow's front page has a wholly disproportionate impact. It does not stop us, though, from paying a successful TV presenter as much a year as a whole company of infantry, or ensuring that any number of professional footballers make as much in a week as a combat infantryman, on his second row of medal-ribbons, does in a busy and dangerous year. The celebrity thrill radiated by popular magazines and echoed by TV talent shows has not prevented a very recent winner of the George Cross (which ranks, with the VC, as our nation's highest award for valour) from working, at half his military pay, in a call centre.

You would be right to observe that I am not comparing like with like. But my point is a simple and, I think, unanswerable one. We do not genuinely recognise what we ask servicemen to do on our behalf. To our lack of real comprehension we add inadequate recompense, and our refusal to address uncomfortable but fundamental issues of strategic purpose, popular will and proper funding quite rightly makes *them* doubt *our* conviction.

So wearing our poppies and sitting in this lovely church is not just an act of historical Remembrance, important though that is. It is a wholly contemporary tribute to courage in adversity – shown as often in a hospital ward as on an Afghan hillside. And it is in recognising that while they will never, never fail us, we may too easily fail them. Do I wear my poppy with pride? Yes, and never more so than today.

Professor Richard Holmes