

The theme for this term is 'only connect' and this evening we will try to connect with war and remembrance. It's a connection that is not always so easy for us to make. The First World War in particular seems so distant, with its blurred monochrome photographs, and endless names carved in stone across northern France and Belgium. Growing up, I remember old Johnny Palmer the bellringer reading out the list of names of those from our parish who had died. I can still recall some of the names now – Henry Neville Chamberlain, Archibald D. Money Penny. But try as I might, I couldn't really picture who they were or what they had done. How can we begin to connect with a phenomenon so vast in its scale, and overlaid with decades of historical interpretation - and reinterpretation? I would like to suggest this evening that we can in fact connect with war on several levels.

The first connection we can make is a local one. The life of Jesus College a hundred years ago was dramatically disrupted by the war as the student population decreased. And of course, many of the students never came back. Read the war memorial at the back of the chapel and look at the dozens of members of the College community listed there. Note especially the number of second lieutenants – a rank that indicates young and junior officers. At one point, the buildings were used as a base by members of the Royal Flying Corps in training. Perhaps the most poignant connection is that in the early years of the First World War, refugees from the battle zones in Northern Europe found a temporary home here in these buildings. This college has a real and tangible connection with the human cost of war.

The freedoms we enjoy have come at a heavy cost. The peace and security that we benefit from each day are not simply happenstance but are hard won. The peace and safety in which we meet tonight is guarded by men and women scattered across the world, often in lonely and dangerous places. And here again Oxford has a close connection with the cost of war. My first tour of duty in the Royal Air Force was at Lyneham in Wiltshire, where we frequently received back the bodies of those who had died from enemy action on operations overseas. And their first journey was to the John Radcliffe hospital here in Oxford. The roads of this city have seen literally hundreds of those journeys since 2001, as recently as seven months ago. The human cost of conflict has been very close at hand for you. One of those who made that journey was Signaller Wayne Bland, some six years ago. Wayne and I served together on my first tour in Afghanistan, where he was a driver. One of the sights that I remember noticing as we travelled in convoys through the city of Kabul were students, travelling openly with books in hand to college and university. They were able to do so because of the enhanced security that Wayne and his colleagues helped provide. So as you travel round this city, with your books and notes, spare a thought for those, like Wayne, who have made huge sacrifices so that we can live in peace and safety.

The final connection is perhaps the most difficult one to make. As we gather in the beauty of this building, listening to the exquisite singing and enjoying the tranquility of this place in prayer and worship, we seem very remote from the horrors of the mud and blood of Flanders. In fact, for many there is a total disconnect, a dissonance between the two. The late Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Lord Brookeborough, was hardly alone when he commented that the experience of the Great War had turned him away from the Christian faith. Where, after all, can we possibly find God among all the chaos and carnage? God may be in his heaven but all is definitely not right with the world.

Our reading tonight from the letter to the Romans offers us a connection. Paul reminds his readers of the preciousness of human life. "One will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die". And that is what we remember and give thanks for today. Those who were - and are prepared - to lay their lives on their line for those they defend. Next year we remember the Battle of Britain, where aircrew fought above their homes and families to defend those they loved. But God goes even further than that. God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Even in the midst of our sin and rebellion against God, while we were his enemies, Christ died for us. God has not in fact remained aloof from our world of conflict but has waded into it and intervened. He's addressed the root cause of our conflicts and strife – our alienation from God. And in these verses Paul is so excited by this truth that he takes it up and like a jeweller admiring a gemstone examines it from different angles - we have been justified - made righteous by his blood, so we are saved from the wrath of God. Turn it again, if God saved us by the death of Jesus when we were his enemies, what will it be like for us now we are reconciled with him and the living Jesus? Turn it again, we can rejoice in God now that we have been reconciled through Christ. Through the cross of Christ the connection between God and humanity is restored. And whatever happens in this world, we have an unshakeable hope in Christ.

And this self-giving love of Christ finds strong echoes at this season of remembrance. Go to the mass cemeteries of northern Europe, to Tyne Cot and Thiépval, and you will find at the centre the Cross of Sacrifice. In February 1918, as the war still raged, Sir Frederick Kenyon designed the cemeteries that would be built. In his plans were these words 'at some prominent spot will rise the Cross, as the symbol of the Christian faith and of the self-sacrifice of the men who now lie beneath its shadow.' When looking for a symbol of sacrificial love, there is nothing which can replace the cross. And if you travel the Great War trail through the Somme and Ypres you will see crosses everywhere. On gravestones, on monuments, at the side of the road. And to this day, when the

Armed Forces wish to recognise bravery, they award a cross - the VC, the MC, the DFC. It's not that the cross is some supremely elegant geometric symbol, it's that nothing else speaks so strongly of self-giving. Even in the desolation of war, the love of God does still speak powerfully through the cross.

Immediately after the First World War, Edward Shillito wrote a poem which encapsulates this perfectly, 'Jesus of the Scars'. The final stanza is this:

The other gods were strong, but Thou wast weak
They rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne.
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak
And not a God has wounds but Thou alone

Faced with the love of God like that, we can simply echo Forster's words – 'only connect'.