

Remembrance Sunday

November 8, 2009

Prayer for Peace: Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the strength of love; So mightily spread abroad your Spirit, that all peoples may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace, as children of one father, to whom be dominion and glory, now and forever. Amen

In some respects, I feel a bit unqualified to address you on this Remembrance Sunday.

My generation (born after 1965) has never been called or drafted into military service. We were too young for Vietnam and too old for some of the more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

So I do not have any personal reflections about my own time in the military to offer you on this morning of Remembrance.

However, I do want to spend some time this morning reflecting on the way that that War and “remembrance” has impacted my intellectual and spiritual formation.

At the age of fourteen, my parents sent me to attend an English style boarding school in Concord, New Hampshire.

St. Paul’s School was founded in 1857 by the Reverend Henry Augustus Coit.

By the time I arrived for my third through sixth form years, the school had seen its students go off to six different wars. (The Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, Korean War, the Vietnam War.)

Remembering those who had died serving our country was an integral part of life at my boarding school.

As a student all of us were seemingly surrounded by various statues, memorials, and names that were carved into the various buildings and chapel of our school.

Each Memorial Day the school reminded its students of those who had died in the service of our country by asking the youngest student (by birth date) to place a wreath at the base of soldier's statue outside the library.

Taps was played and the rector of the school read the names of former students who had died in various wars beginning with the Spanish American War.

Class Reunion weekends at St. Paul's School always started with a trip to the school cemetery so that the students were reminded (before the crew races and parties begin) of those who came before them and made the ultimate sacrifice protecting our freedoms and fighting for the cause of peace.

Perhaps though, the strongest reminder of how important it is *to remember* could be found two places in our school's chapel.

The First place is in the alcove of the chapel on your left as you enter.

There is a large memorial statue called *Death and Youth* with an angel holding a fallen soldier. The statue was done by Daniel Chester French in the late 1920's.

I have included a picture for you in this morning's bulletin.

As a young student, I found it difficult to enter the chapel without pausing to look at the sculpture.

The first reason should be obvious. The angel and young soldier are huge and they dominate the small space.

But also, I found it was difficult to look at the sculpture and not experience an overwhelming sense of sadness and loss.

You can see from the picture there is on the wall behind the sculpture a list of the forty-eight students who died in the First World War and at the base is the following inscription,

In memory of the Boys of St. Paul's School who gave their Lives in the Great War, 1914-1918.

I am sure looking back after twenty-six years that the founders and leaders of my school did not want us to ever forget the sacrifices that others had made for us especially when we came together for worship in the chapel.

They wanted us to see this statue when we entered the chapel and they wanted us all to remember.

The other reminder was a bit more subtle and could be found in the pews of our chapel.

It was also something that students carried with them when they departed from St. Paul's.

In my hand this morning is a small red prayer book that is given to each sixth former when they graduate. It is also is the book that we used for weekly worship at the school.

This small prayer book was put together in 1925 by the second rector of the school, Samuel Drury.

And each prayer book includes the following memorial on the opening pages.

*In memory of Alfred Wild Gardner, First Lieutenant, 305th
Infantry, DSC, Class of 1914 St. Paul's School, 1895-1918*

There was also an extract from General Order 41, 77th Division
1918

1st Lieutenant Alfred Gardner, Co E 305th infantry who in the Argonne Forest on the afternoon of October 3, 1918, in an attack on a series of strong German gun nests, with utter disregard of his personal danger, led his company up the steep slope of a ravine in the face of murderous machine gun fire, and was himself killed in action. In so doing he afforded the men of his command an example of exceptional devotion to duty and bravery and self-sacrifice and in his life and death has been a constant inspiration to his men.

The Meuse Argonne battle which lasted from September 26 to November 10 saw some of the bloodiest fighting in the War and some of the highest US casualties, yet it is little remembered today by most Americans.

Even though it was the last major engagement of the Great War and led right up to the armistice on November 11, 1918.

While I have never seen a picture of Lieutenant Alfred Gardner, I have always imagined him as one of those young men in the pictures on the walls of my school heading off to Harvard or Yale thinking about his future.

He probably like most of us looked forward to marriage, raising a family, and the life ahead of him.

Yet for Lt. Gardner that future came to an abrupt end in the forest on October 3, 1918 at the age of 23.

And even today it is impossible for me to open up this little book of prayers and hymns and not remember him.

When I attended my boarding school, sixty-one years had passed since “the war to end all wars” had ended.

And yet in giving us this small prayer book to take with us when we left our school, the teachers did not want us to forget those who had fought and sacrificed to bring peace to our world.

Looking back, it might seem strange that my school was so focused on World War I, but this year you may also be aware there was also a special service at Westminster Abbey to mark the death of the final three World War I veterans in England.

So it is especially appropriate that we spend our time this morning offering God thanks for the lives of all those who served our respective countries in that First World War.

We should wear our red poppies and offer our thanks again to that generation who no longer speak to us directly but has now passed into the pages of our history books.

Of course, all of us that gather this day are painfully aware this morning that the “War to end all Wars” did not achieve that aim and that other major and minor wars have come and gone in the past eighty-one years.

The fallen state of our world make it more important than ever that we gather at St. Martin in the Fields after 35 years and offer our thanks and prayers to all those in our Allied countries for those who have served and continue to serve our respective countries to protect our freedoms and to fight for the cause of peace around the world.

As Christians we gather and pray for peace. We ask that God make it possible that the day may come where we may beat our swords into plowshares and that we all may live to see the day that the city of the new Jerusalem descending from heaven and our God will wipe away the tears that continue to stain our eyes.

But until that day arrives, until in God’s good time we are able to join hands with our brothers and sisters around the world, let us all continue to work for the cause of peace, and that all of God’s children may live freely in our world.