

Rector's Remembrance Day Speech – 10 November 2008

We have just listened to a reading from Ecclesiastes – one of the most memorable, powerfully rhetorical passages in the Bible. It has been the source of book titles, of lyrics and of the rhetoric of politicians. The contrasts hypnotise; a time to live, a time to die; a time for killing and a time for healing – a time for every purpose under heaven.

And the past few days, leading up to the two-minute silence tomorrow at 11am on 11th November, have provided a time for a specific purpose – a time for Remembrance. It is not a time for celebration, not a time for embracing, not a time for thanksgiving, but a time for remembering.

Two weeks ago, a theatre company visited The King's Theatre in Edinburgh with Robin Kingsland's play, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, based on Erich Maria Remarque's spectacularly successful novel of the same title, published in Germany in 1929. The First World War had finished ten years before; the Second World War would begin ten years later. Remarque was German, and the international success of his novel reflected at last the truth being told of what it was like to be a soldier with a group of comrades on the Western Front, the epicentre of the conflict during 1914-18. Millions bought the book, for many purposes – the recreation of a First World War reality, the identification with so many convincing personalities, the vulgarly robust humour, the savagery and ultimately the pathos. Buying the book became an act of remembrance. Hitler on coming to power in the 1930s banned the book because of its seditious influence; he overlooked the positives about comradeship.

Listen to this short extract about lice:

Killing each separate louse is a tedious business when a man has hundreds. The little beasts are hard and the everlasting cracking with one's fingernails very soon becomes wearisome. So Tjaden has rigged up the lid of a boot-polish tin with a piece of wire over the lighted stump of a candle. The lice are simply thrown into this little pan. Crack! and they're done for.

We sit around with our shirts on our knees, our bodies naked to the warm air and our hands at work. Haie has a particularly fine brand of louse: they have a red cross on their heads. He suggests that he brought them back with him from the hospital at Thourhout, where they attended personally on a surgeon-general. He says he means to use the fat that slowly

accumulates in the tin-lid for polishing his boots, and roars with laughter for half an hour at his own joke.

I mentioned earlier that the novel had an international appeal. For the first time in history, humanity had survived an international war – the entire planet was involved, and tomorrow, the entire planet will remember. Google the words “Remembrance Day” and any country or town and you will be surprised by the links.

In Assembly today, we unite and gather our thoughts. In every area, this Remembrance week brings thoughts of past, present and future. Einstein said, “The world is a dangerous place to live in, not because of people who are evil, but because of the people who don’t do anything about it”. We come from so many countries outside Scotland – elsewhere in the UK, from France, Germany and Spain; from Poland, from Canada, from Moldova and from the USA with four young ladies from Connecticut having just arrived today. We have three young men from Barbados here.

I read an announcement on the internet this week:

“The war dead will be honoured on Sunday November 9, 2008 with the customary parade and short service at the Cenotaph, with ceremonies beginning at 8am. The Prime Minister will attend and lay wreaths in remembrance of the servicemen who lost their lives in World War I and World War II. The Diplomatic Corps and uniformed organisations will also participate in the ceremony during the parade of armed and unarmed units. The Defence Forces and Police Band will provide music for the units marching.”

That parade took place in Barbados; the Cenotaph was the one on National Heroes Square and the Prime Minister wasn’t Gordon Brown but was Mr David Thompson; The Police Band was of Barbados Police. And events such as the one yesterday in Dollar, the parade and the two minutes silence, exist throughout the world. We unify in that moment.

Yes, it’s ninety years since the First World War ended, and many here will regard that length of time as inconceivable. Four years ago, a book was published, *Last Post*, with memories from the remaining nineteen soldiers from World War I who were still alive in 2004. The vividness of their stories shines through. Listen to the words of John Osborne on a familiar subject:

Lice. I didn’t have lice. They had me. The seams of your trousers used to be their nesting place – you’d have to run the seams

over a candle. I always remember, there was one chappie, as we were delousing he used to say, 'Ah, little chap. I'm going to put you back – and have you tomorrow when you're bigger.' There was a comical side to it all, but it was dreary sometimes. It's pretty boring, war. It was a hard ten months on the front but we were brainwashed so much that the mind's a blank. I can remember little things, but that's all.

Fiction and fact come together surprisingly in these readings.

In History, you will have explored the reasons for the First World War; you might even have the thought that the First World War and the cataclysmic loss of life it caused should never have happened. The loss of so many stalwart, brave, innocent people caused a dilution of human quality, it has been argued. Each of the causes by itself seemed to cry out for a more rational method of closure. Yet despite the loss of life, only twenty years later, the world was once again at war admittedly for causes which seemed much more tangible and thus acceptable – violation of other countries and monstrous crimes against humanity. There was a clear axis of evil which just could not have been defeated by diplomacy. An horrendous, but unquestionably just war. War was almost immediate, and in every country. The bombing of Pearl Harbour in the USA, the Blitzing of London, of Glasgow and Sheffield, of Manchester and Coventry brought an immediacy to civilians. The Second World War wasn't just for soldiers in mud. Speak with your grandparents and elderly relatives who will sharpen your focus.

In central Europe, war was all around – not just in the great corridors of Belgium and North East France. Last Easter, I was in Poland, based in Krakow. Like a number of people in this hall, I travelled the thirty-five miles to Auschwitz and Birkenau, and saw in an eerie silence the Concentration Camps, the death blocks where so many innocents died in World War II.

But one day, Mary and I travelled in the opposite direction to a little town thirty-five miles west of Krakow, Tarnau. This was a perfectly conventional little town, with a most attractive market square surrounded by cafes, shops and municipal buildings. The houses are painted in dusty pastel colours, typical of the region – olive, deep pink, sandstone yellow. A working square now with the usual mixture of parking wardens, business people and school pupils – the square is about the size of our two hockey pitches on the left hand side of West Approach.

Look more closely, and there are bullet holes in almost every one of those pretty buildings. One of the buildings is the town's Holocaust

museum. Tarnau, before the Second World War had 25,000 Jews. By the end of the war, it had none. Many had been transported to Auschwitz and to other death camps. But one night in 1942, 4,000 Jews were herded into that main square in Tarnau, and they were all executed. Industrial slaughter in a town centre. And the memory of such moments cannot be allowed to die. The names of Ypres, of Verdun, of Auschwitz, of Belsen are forever associated with wars. To Polish people, Tarnau is not a name from a Kipling ballad.

Every year I fear that speaking to the school on the topic of Remembrance will become more difficult, more distant. It is actually quite the opposite. The power of the Internet allows exploration; satellite TV channels keep discovering new images of old conflicts; the voices of survivors become weaker and yet more powerful, and wherever one goes, Remembrance can be discovered in public places, in antique shops, in plaques on buildings – and of course, daily outside the bronze doors of Dollar Academy, our own war memorial, the unforgettable statue by George Paulin.

When I was your age, I was aware that my father's closest friend in Austria before World War II had never been seen again after the war began; his house on the Kärtnerstrasse in Vienna had been taken over by the military, and the family lost without trace. Your width and power of Remembrance will grow inevitably, just as mine have from that insoluble absence.

In the past week, the world has seen new possibilities: the language of Barack Obama has focused on hope and aspiration; it has avoided the language of control. The President-Elect of the United States has dared to dream, has dared to speak of unity, and has dared to contemplate peace in our world.

Don't let the cynics talk you out of holding ideals. The Obama bounce will lift the USA and I hope the rest of the world. Tomorrow, for two minutes at 11am, dare to think differently yourselves. Yes, I ask you to value that tradition when you can join with everyone in remembering the past, in respecting your future, but above all in recognising why you are actually alive in this present. Just two minutes from your day, but a necessary seriousness for your future lives. A time to remember, and a time to move onwards in hope.

JSR
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