

Parish of Esher
Christ Church, Esher with St George's, West End

SERMON

Remembrance Day, 11 November 2018

Jonah 3.1-5, 10; Psalm 62.5-end; Mark 1.14-20

Ven David Gerrard

In the Name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The past few weeks have been full of reminders of Remembrance Day and especially of the 100th Anniversary of the Armistice on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918 when, after four years of the most brutal war the world had ever seen, all the guns on the Western Front fell silent. There have been articles in the papers, many television programmes, books, films, novels, musical events, lighted flares, and many more. And so today in the rededication of the War Memorial on the Green and in this church, as in millions of churches worldwide, we meet to pay our own tributes.

The whole war time experience is difficult to comprehend. The destruction, the deaths of some seventeen million soldiers and civilians in the First World War, the changes to the world to which this led; the Russian revolution; the entry of America into European wars; the rearmament of Germany which led to the Second World War, the technology changes brought about by warfare; a generation of young women who would never marry or bear children as their men, husbands, boyfriends were killed in the insensate slaughter; the destruction of families with so many children growing up fatherless.

Let me give you one brief story to illustrate the almost unimaginable international picture. When I was working on a French farm in the Meuse valley over sixty years ago the farmer's mother-in-law was a widow, always dressed in black, who was one of five children. Her four brothers were all killed in the battle of Verdun where there were a million killed, in just that one battle.

The two world wars, or perhaps as historians now say, the One World War with its two halves, were a vision of hell, so the first thing all of us here should do this morning is to give thanks that in the past 60 years there has never been another conflagration like it. There have been wars and civil wars, but no major international conflicts between great powers, most of them we should remember Christian nations. They have opposed each other but without major wars and nothing on the scale of those two World Wars.

Today our armed forces are but a tiny fraction of those existing in those wars. We have no conscription; no national Service. Problems yes. Deaths and murders, ethnic cleansing yes, but nothing on the scale of those hideous World Wars, and for this we give thanks.

The other great message is that during those wars we saw the best and the worst of human behaviour. Utter savagery, unbelievable cruelties, and yet also the greatest examples of courage and bravery, the most enormous self-sacrifices one can imagine. We must pledge our small part that in the future we must be on the side of the angels of mercy, and utterly, utterly against the devils of destruction.

Let me illustrate these conflicts in human behaviour, the daily struggle in which we are locked between good and evil, selfishness and selflessness with the story of one man.

A brilliant chemist called Fritz Haber was born in Poland in 1868, but was educated in Germany. He invented the Haber-Bosch process, a method for the industrial processing of nitrogen gas and hydrogen that became the basis for the mass production of fertilizer, which all over the world has transformed arid lands into fertile farmland, thus enabling billions more people on our planet to be adequately fed. For this momentous discovery he was deservedly awarded the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1919.

So far an encouraging story of a brilliant scientist. However, it is far from the whole story. Although Haber had some Jewish ancestry he was personally a short, potbellied fascist. He was pleased when he developed the first chlorine gas, and he deployed 160 tons of the gas at Ypres in the First World War and was delighted with his results. 6,000 men died. This was in

direct contravention of the Hague Convention of 1899 prohibiting the use of asphyxiating weapons. France and Britain swiftly began to develop their own chemical weapons and gas masks in response. Chlorine gas is still used, in the last few years in Iraq by Saddam Hussein and by Assad in Syria. It was rapidly followed by the development of phosgene and mustard gases. About 10,000 soldiers died from the gas attacks in the First World War with a million more suffering often appalling injuries. Haber boasted, "My work was essential for the economic and military expansion of Germany. I was one of the mightiest of men."

Haber was married to Clara Immerwahr, a distinguished scientist herself. She had denounced chemical weapons as an abomination, and was appalled by what she rightly saw as a descent into scientific savagery. Two weeks after the first chlorine attacks she took Haber's service revolver into their Berlin garden and shot herself. Haber returned to the front and did not attend her funeral.

After the war Haber fell foul of the Nazi race laws so to avoid the death camps he took brief refuge in Britain, and then moved to Switzerland where he died in 1934. He did not live to see the grimmest of all the ironies inherent in his life. He had also invented Zyklon B gas as a pest control using hydrogen cyanide, but it was also used to murder millions of Jews, and Communists, and the mentally ill, and Roma in the Nazi death camps.

It is difficult to imagine a life that did so much for humanity as discovering a way to grow more food to feed countless people, yet also difficult to image a more gross dereliction of humanity than inventing, boasting about, and using hideous weapons of malignant cruelty.

We all have choices to make about how we live our lives, and the stories from the World Wars should teach us that we must struggle to serve good and not evil, to follow the example of brave men and women not evil ones, to serve others and not satisfy ourselves, and if we are unsure, as we often are, how to achieve this, we must follow the example and teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile let us remember with sadness all those who died in these wars as well as the lesser numbers who have been, and still are, murdered in wars and civil wars, in civil wars and ethnic cleansings, and let us rejoice in the bravery of those who did, and still do, fight and struggle to oppose all evil and injustice.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.

Rest eternal grant to them O Lord and may light perpetual shine upon them.

May they rest in peace and rise in Glory. Amen.