

## Remembrance Sunday - 8<sup>th</sup> November 2009

*Micah 4:1-8; Romans 8:31-end; John 6:37-40*

For some weeks now at choir practice we have been rehearsing the anthem for today's service – *Astons' "So they gave their bodies"*. It is a beautiful anthem, based on the funeral oration given by Pericles in Athens in 431 BC. At that time it was established Athenian practice to hold a public funeral in honour of all those who had died in war, and Pericles' oration is for the soldiers who had died at one of the opening battles of the Peloponnesian War.

Over the weeks the words of this anthem, based on words spoken almost two and half thousand years, began to resonate deeply within me.

*So they gave their bodies to the commonwealth,  
and received praise that will never die,  
and a home in the minds of men.  
Their story lives on without visible symbol,  
woven into the stuff of other men's lives,  
woven, woven, into the stuff of other men's lives.  
So they gave their bodies to the commonwealth,  
and received praise that will never die, that will never,  
never, never die, and received praise that will never die.*

*Woven, woven into the stuff of other men's lives.* I would expect that each one of us here has a story of someone who has died as a result of war or conflict woven somehow into our lives – a relative, friend, neighbour, colleague, or comrade, or someone perhaps whose story we heard of in some other way and it stayed with us. Whether this is a story from many decades, or even longer ago, or in more recent times, that story somehow becomes part of our story, both personally and communally.

It was with these words echoing in my heart and mind that I went off to France with my sister just two weeks ago. We were on a journey to try and unravel something of a story that had been woven into our lives for as long as we could remember. From a fairly young age I have been aware of the story of my Grandfather William and his two brothers, Jack and Tom. In 1914 all three Macdonald brothers were working in Burnhope Colliery in County Durham and, although at that time it was usual for members of the same family to join the same regiment, they made what seemed like a wise decision at that time. Jack joined the Northumberland Fusiliers (Tyne Scottish division); Tom the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and my grandfather the Durham Light Infantry. By 1916 they were all deployed in France. Jack was killed on that fateful first day of the Battle of the Somme. 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 – the middle day of the middle year of the First World War that is remembered as the bloodiest day in the history of the British Army when there were 57,470 casualties of which 19,240 were killed or died of wounds. Jack's division was the worst-hit of all the 16 Divisions used on the day and his body was never recovered. Quite amazingly, sometime in early 1918, my grandfather met his surviving brother Tom in a Transit Camp somewhere in France. It was the last time they saw one another. Not long afterwards Tom was injured at the beginning of the second battle of the Somme and died in a German field hospital in Clary on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1918. He was later buried at Honnechy British Cemetery, just a few miles away.

How do we know some of these details? Well through researching military records and our family tree, but primarily through the stories that came to us directly from my grandfather.

Although wounded twice he survived the war and actually lived until I was in my twenties. My grandfather's story, and the stories of Jack and Tom became woven into the our lives and it was with almost indescribable sense of timelessness and connectedness that my sister and I stood beneath the Thiepval Memorial two weekends ago; the memorial which bears the names of 72,000 officers and men of the United Kingdom and South African forces who died in the Somme sector in less than a two year period and have no known grave - and we were actually able to touch the engraved letters that spelled out Jack's name. A few hours later, after we had visited some other sites in the area, we stood before Tom's grave in Honnechy Cemetery, with those same deep feelings of timelessness and connectedness.

From even before the time of Pericles, to the Great War, to this very day there has been recognition that the human story has meaning when our stories are inter-woven with the stories of others. To live otherwise is to lead a lonely and impoverished life. To this very day, whenever we hear of casualties, military or civilian in Afghanistan or Iraq or in any other place of conflict in the world, it becomes part of our story too. The numbers today may not be as overwhelming as those of the First World War, but as I looked at those names on the Thiepval memorial I could not but help think of those 72,000 people as individuals - each with families and comrades, and wider circles of friends and communities mourning their loss. And the ripples of pain and loss are no less today, for the story of the loss of life each of individual in war or conflict today becomes woven into the story of the lives of many, many others.

But there is also another story that is deeply woven into our lives. The God story. The story revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Christ which had become so deeply woven into the life of the Apostle Paul that in his letter to the Christians in Rome he was able to write:

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

When as Christians this story is woven into our lives and we bring it face to face, not just with stories of our own loved ones that we gathered to remember yesterday in our memorial service for All Souls, but also with the stories of the millions we have come to remember today who died for their country in war and in the service of humankind - and all innocent victims - we find the assurance that death does not have the final word. In Jesus' own words from today's Gospel:

*And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. (John 6.40)*

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