**Remembrance Sunday 2012 – Sermon by the Dean of Belfast, the Very Rev John Mann**

**“And he sat down opposite the treasury, and watched….” (Mark 12:41)**

Remembrance Sunday, like all days that recall the past but have a bearing on the present, is intended to move us. It moves us in thought, in emotion and, as a result of this inner disturbance, helps us to reflect on the ground upon which we are standing. Well, perhaps that is too precise; our reflection is on an adjacent plot; where others are or have been or where we or others may go.

Three or four years ago a film was released with the enigmatic title “Into Great Silence”. It is set in a monastery in the eastern part of Europe; it is winter; the monks are freezing cold and the camera lingers long on candles burning in the dark, a bell tolling in the silence, a vegetable being cut, a new habit made, stark wood and stone, bare hands and feet. The emphasis is on the incidental detail surrounding the lives of these men. The film ends in an extraordinary and unexpected way, but that is part of its charm and its insistence; for to watch this film – unless one wishes to sit fidgeting in extreme frustration – it is necessary to enter an entirely reflective state of mind. To literally sit down and watch; for the stimulus is in the lack of action, the lack of words, the reversion to a still, silent world of timeless human interaction with people and things that have always been.

Today, in the quiet of this Cathedral, we consider the things that have always been. The human capacity for making a mess of things and shaping for war; the human gift of compassion and healing; that striving for peace and the reconciling of the effects of past mistakes. Within all of this is an engagement with what matters for individuals and families; there is love and duty, pride and fear, ambition and challenge; sacrifice and compassion. Little things turn nations; small things change individuals. We don’t always need the dramatic and the great to make us better people, as St James pointed out in his Epistle in the New Testament, just the very tiniest of things (relative to the whole) can affect something much greater. He took the examples of the rudder on a ship, a small movement of which changes the direction of a great vessel, or the tongue – a tiny part of the human body - but its words, through praise or curse, have a disproportionate power to stimulate or deflate others. Jesus was concerned for those things that cause us to be more fulfilled and that transport us to a fresh understanding of what being human is all about, and did this on the basis that true life is not an artificial concept, it is real, and the Christian believes that it is found in and through him.

As we look back over the past 100 years at two World Wars and many other conflicts; as we know ourselves to be effected by present day security fears; as today we pray with and for those about to be deployed from our community in Afghanistan, the consistent theme within Christian worship, that is focused in a particular way on Remembrance Sunday, causes us to stand and watch as Jesus stood at the treasury in the Temple precincts and watched. The reason for watching today is different to that of Jesus – he was looking to observe who were the great givers – ours is a watch of care; a watch that appreciates and seeks to understand; a watch that reaches into the silence of the unspoken, to hold the pride and joy of the truly loving heart within the encompassing protection of the one, who though Lord and King, is friend and brother, the constant companion on the way – the Good Shepherd.

What brings us to this point of Remembrance on this Sunday each year goes back a long time; to a different world, and in it, a different view of what makes for peace between, and indeed within, nations. It goes back to the Great War; to the fields and trenches of France and everything associated with that War to end Wars – which it didn’t - but it did sow the seed of changing attitudes, to the value of human life and the case for immediate attention to the injured. Much has been done to see that the striving for a compassionate and just society, in places where these things have been sacrificed in the cause of power, domination or perceived religious or racial superiority, is recognised as a more important cause for peacekeeping activities than the purely internal concern for one nation’s protection. In other words that a broader agenda is necessary to combat evil in the world, than any one country’s particular views, desires or sense of mission. Symbolically, and actually, the deployment from this Island of medical, nursing and support staff to Afghanistan shows that the strength of will and the call to care compassionately for the injured of war, is shared by those ready to go, and those who will direct them.

A field hospital today will operate in ways that are the product of many years of experience of the armed services in time of war as well as in exercises and planning in time of peace; so in this service, in our time of reflection in the silence of remembrance, when we bring to mind the huge sacrifices of previous generations, we recall those whose guidance and experience – and indeed vision – have led to the quality of care available to the soldiers, sailors and aircrew of our day. Many non-combatants as well as those armed have given willingly of themselves in dangerous situations, we remember them as we think of, and pray for, those from our community, families and friends, who are being deployed in Afghanistan early next year.

Jesus, in today’s Gospel, is bringing the subject of offering to the attention of those around him. He is looking at the money that is being placed in the treasury of the Temple in Jerusalem, but the point that he makes in reference to the widow’s mite is that each of us has the ability and possibility to give sacrificially of what we possess, or alternatively to give in a way that we will not notice, because relative to what we keep for ourselves, it is nothing. Whilst there is not a direct comparison with the offering of oneself to serve in some capacity for the needs of others, there is an indirect parallel. But it is one that goes to the heart of the caring professions in our society – and here I would draw you back to the point at which I started, the consideration of the compassionate watching, patient attention of one human being to another.

The waiting and watching begins with our attention to God. The psalmist or prophet saw himself as a watchman; eyes held through the night ready to glimpse the dawn. There is this important aspect to any Christian’s response to the love of God and the willing of herself or himself to be drawn to signs of renewal and hope. It is part of the fervent prayer of us all that a fairer, more just and peaceful world may emerge from situations of conflict and instability in many places, not least in Afghanistan. But, beside that watching and waiting for signs of hope on the world stage, for many there is the waiting and watching for the particular sign of something improving: the examination of an injury, “Is this wound healing?” “Has it changed since yesterday?” “Are there any signs of infection?”, or, in the case of the critically injured, watching for vital signs every few moments. The individual and particular is viewed beside the wider concerns shared by everyone.

From prayers emerging from such watching comes action; this, far from being reflective and patient, may well require speed of response such that skill and order, the effects of rigorous training and practice, demonstrated in commitment to the task what has ever been expected of those who serve in the armed forces of this Country. For non-combatants the eyes are not on an enemy, perceived or not, but on the needs of those whose lives may depend upon the care they receive, whilst living and serving conscious of risk and danger. The commitment that engages with such need is vital, reassuring and ultimately, life-preserving; teamwork paramount, support essential and that in the face of the knowledge that not every life can be saved, not every situation made better. But many can and will be and in the quiet times of rest, those who care deal with the flood of thought, processed before God in prayer in the person of faith. This is an exercise of trust as well as concern.

All whose way of life includes the necessity to wait and watch, needs an ability to be reflective, a process that involves not only the picking up of concerns, but the skill and discipline to lay them down as well. It is the same principle that is used in avoiding distraction in prayer. To concentrate fully on one thing, then like turning the page in a book, trustfully that person or situation is placed with God and another person or concern is fully engaged. I offer this to you for your prayers in the coming weeks. It is good spiritual practice and a way of establishing order in our devotional life, especially in situations of stress and pressure.

We will pray for you here; that you remain in safety, fulfilling your calling, knowing the support of all who are with you actually, or in spirit; and, please, come back to us here to this special place when you can, and we shall join you in prayers of thanksgiving. May the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon you, in your going out and in your coming in, from this time forth for evermore.