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**PRESS RELEASE**

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**PLEASE RESPECT THE EMBARGO**

**Address by Archbishop Richard Clarke at the Service at St Anne’s Cathedral, Belfast to Commemorate the Centenary of the Outbreak of the First World War, Monday 4 August 2014**

At today’s service at St Anne’s Cathedral, Belfast, Archbishop Richard Clarke will say in his address: ‘We can create easily monuments of hatred (it takes no effort at all), or we can painstakingly and even painfully build monuments of beauty, even to a horrifying past. We can allow the ruins of what others have made of our hopes and longings to stand there, bare and broken, as a symbol of our hatred. We can build monuments to darkness, and it is only too easy to do. We can, and it is by far the more painful option, seek to restore beauty and even restore relationships, and allow light to shine in the darkness. It requires faith, courage and patience.’ He will continue: ‘And as we come into God’s presence here to recall and memorialise the beginnings of the Great War one hundred years later, it should be to lay before God’s feet all the fusion of emotions that there should be – sadness at the loss of so much life, young and old … pride in the unselfish actions of many people … horror at the inhumanity always accompanies war, and to this day … and determination that if this Great War was most certainly not a “war to end all wars”, nevertheless you and I will strive to bring God’s peace and light into God’s world.’

***Full transcript of the Address by The Most Revd Dr Richard Clarke, Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of All Ireland:***

**John 1.5: ‘The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.’**

Did the nation-states of Europe simply drift into the Great War that began one hundred years ago, or was there rather a tragic inevitability to it all, in that – sooner or later – immensely powerful and highly militarised empires were bound to seek the opportunity to fight it out with one another for economic and political supremacy?

Ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty mark so much of a War that would engulf Europe and a wider world for more than four years and take the lives of more than sixteen million people, that only somebody with no sense of history, or no sense at all, would seek to suggest neat and simple answers to the political, social and indeed moral questioning that has always surrounded this First World War.

In the Great War, we see heroism and cruelty standing side by side, we see cynical disillusionment and moral determination intertwining, and we see hope and despair in equal measure, and on every side. This was the first time that the weaponry of war could be fully industrialised and it was, also for the first time, that the phrase ‘total war’ was coined to indicate that civilians were to be regarded as being as much part of the war as the military.

But there are of course also the myths to be debunked. It was not only foot soldiers who died in battle. Indeed, if one was an officer, one’s chances of dying on the western front were fifty percent greater than for those in other ranks. The British generals were for the most part not the total incompetents they are presented as being in popular mythology. Many of them too died in battle; they were not relaxing in beautiful chateaus miles behind the front lines. And personally I can well remember as a child knowing a number of veterans of the First World War whose memories of the conflict were not uniformly terrible.

For all of this, however, the 1914-18 War undoubtedly changed the history of the twentieth century. Three European empires had disappeared by the end of the War in 1918, and we can also trace to this war the beginnings of the sunset on a fourth empire, the British Empire. Also emerging from the Great War are the seeds of the development of two ‘super-powers’ – the United States of America and Soviet Russia – that would come to dominate the world for almost half a century after the ending of the Second World War, that further titanic war that in many respects cannot be totally separated from the First. The course of history changed, brutally, dramatically and forever.

Even the poets – so emblematic of this War (although perhaps not with entire justification) – cannot bring us images that will harmonise together. It is often assumed that it was only later in the War that the poets began to show us in full detail the horrors of war – ‘the pity of war’ as Wilfred Owen famously termed it – but yet, from the beginning, there are strange dissonances in the poets’ understanding of what this War might mean. There is surely irony in the way that an atheist, Rupert Brooke (who died within months of the beginning of the War), could exult in God’s role in the hostilities that were unfolding before his eyes:

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,

And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,

With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,

To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,

Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary.

And yet Charles Hamilton Sorley, a Christian believer, who bequeathed to us the words of that familiar Church anthem, ‘This sanctuary of my soul’, and who died at the Battle of Loos in 1915, could write coldly and almost nihilistically of the carnage around him:

When you see millions of the mouthless dead

Across your dreams in pale battalions go,

Say not soft things as other men have said,

That you'll remember. For you need not so.

Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know

It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?

Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.

Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.

Say only this, ‘They are dead.’ Then add thereto,

‘Yet many a better one has died before.’

Where then is the Christian place to be in the midst of the confusions and the ambiguity, and the pain and the waste, and the heroism and the idealism? What is to be our response, our memorial, one hundred years on?

First and foremost, we can only offer to God our confusion of thought – our admiration and our desolation, our despair and our courage – and pray that he will, in his grace, bring all things to their true end, that we may encounter his light in the midst of darkness. But we have further responsibility than this.

We must remember, and we must ensure that the monuments we erect, even in our own hearts, are monuments that point also towards a future under God. And, without being guilty of the worst kind of religious escapism, we cannot spiritually separate the violence, the carnage, and the suffering of the innocent that is under our gaze today – whether in Gaza, in Israel, in Syria, in Ukraine or in Iraq – from our memorialising of the beginnings of the First World War. War must always represent the abject failure of the human spirit and of humanity itself. It can never be other and we should never pretend it is other.

A few weeks ago, I paid my umpteenth visit to what is, for some of us at least, the most beautiful of all the great cathedrals of France, the Cathedral of Reims. Next month, September 2014, will mark the centenary of the burning of the cathedral in the early weeks of the War. That destruction was followed by more than 300 direct hits on the cathedral from artillery shelling. And the targeting of the cathedral was fully intentional. Reims Cathedral had been the place where the kings of France had been anointed and crowned for centuries. It was a potent symbol of France itself, even of a French Republic, and so it was worth destroying, even though it was one of the great landmarks of European culture.

At the end of war, there was the serious proposal that the wrecked and roofless Cathedral (by now little more than a shell) should be left as it was, as a monument to the barbarity of the enemy. The archbishop and the mayor of Reims refused, and said that the cathedral must be restored, however difficult that might be. One hundred years on, it has largely been returned to its former beauty, helped initially by the American Rockefeller Foundation but also by gifts and sponsorship, the most recent of which (in the past few years) has been a series of beautiful stained glass windows designed by Imi Knoebel, a German artist. And six new stained glass windows are to be given by the German Government to the cathedral, to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War.

Yes, we can create easily monuments of hatred (it takes no effort at all), or we can painstakingly and even painfully build monuments of beauty, even to a horrifying past. We can allow the ruins of what others have made of our hopes and longings to stand there, bare and broken, as a symbol of our hatred. We can build monuments to darkness, and it is only too easy to do. We can, and it is by far the more painful option, seek to restore beauty and even restore relationships, and allow light to shine in the darkness. It requires faith, courage and patience. It was, after all, almost fifty years after the destruction of the Cathedral of Reims before Charles De Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer could come together to the city to celebrate reinstated relationships.

Building monuments – whether physical, emotional or spiritual – is something which we must always undertake with care and reverence. Through the Hebrew scriptures, monuments were placed only to remember God and his dealings with his people, whether at Bethel or at the Jordan and, indeed, within the intense memorial of Passover. And as we come into God’s presence here to recall and memorialise the beginnings of the Great War one hundred years later, it should be to lay before God’s feet all the fusion of emotions that there should be – sadness at the loss of so much life, young and old … pride in the unselfish actions of many people … horror at the inhumanity always accompanies war, and to this day … and determination that if this Great War was most certainly not a ‘war to end all wars’, nevertheless you and I will strive to bring God’s peace and light into God’s world.

Memorialising can be a crude, self-obsessive and vengeful thing – an empty shell of past hatreds that seeks to demonise an enemy forever – or it can become, with forbearance, integrity and true spiritual courage, a thing of beauty that can strive to radiate the glory and the presence of God.

In a couple of hours’ time, lights will be extinguished throughout the United Kingdom as a reminder of the famous words of Sir Edward Grey one hundred years ago, ‘The lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime’. It is an appropriate memorial. But yet, as people of faith, we must be ready to set alongside it another message about light and darkness, that eternal truth of the Gospel, ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it’.

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