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*The full text of the sermon preached by the Dean of Belfast, the Very Rev John Mann, at a service of commemoration on the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, held in St Anne’s Cathedral on Sunday July 3 at 3.30pm.*

The City of Jerusalem, that Jesus contemplates from the Mount of Olives, concerning which we heard in the reading from Saint Mark this afternoon, has been fought over many, many times; more, almost certainly, than any other city on earth. A place that is a spiritual centre of three religious traditions, Jewish, Christian and Moslem, a place where peace is preached and prayers are said constantly, that pilgrims visit from all over the world, and where there are reminders everywhere of religious practice being publicly displayed. This place that lies at the heart of all of these things has also been a crucible of destruction, aggression, desperate defence and untold violence. Jesus warns of the undermining effects of misreading signs, listening to the wrong people, predicting what may never happen, anticipating persecution; yet he says at the same time to expect this level of turmoil, in fact worse, for even families will be divided amongst themselves.

The second reading at the service in fact encapsulates the fears of humanity when it feels insecure. Those of us who have not had homes and livelihoods threatened find it difficult to contemplate what living vulnerably must be like; not knowing from one moment to another whether a loved one is going to be killed or injured; having no idea whether what we rely on is secure enough to face the onslaught from outside. These fears are natural to human beings. In reading through the personal testimonies of soldiers of all ranks who fought at the Somme, life for them was not much different. I recall reading of an officer who was contemplating not just how they would be thought of by those who were at home, but how they would be judged in years to come. We now are in the years that to them were ‘to come’ and fixed in a time-capsule of our own. How do we remember? What do we commemorate? How do we look upon the men and officers and strategic planners of the Somme and other battles that, for example in the case of the Somme alone, produced 1,250,000 dead and wounded British, Irish, French and German soldiers? That number is too great to contemplate, too high to imagine; it is just a very, very large figure. Today we remember not a statistic but a human tragedy, a catastrophe.

It has been said that our remembrance should not so much concentrate on what happened, or even on who or what we remember, the really important thing is ‘how’ we remember. How do we set this in context, for us, for our day? Just remembering quietly in thanksgiving for another’s sacrifice is of course important, but what it means to us, partially at least, results in *what it makes us become.* This is even more important, because we can change things in our day for good, as those who fought at the Somme 100 years ago attempted in their day. We act with the knowledge and vision that we have at that moment. This does not make truth relative, but is a serious judgement on how we perceive truth. So we will not get caught up this afternoon with: whether the tactics were right, whether the intelligence was sound, whether the blanket bombardment was correctly directed. Those questions are for the lecture theatre, not for a church service, least of all for one of remembrance and commemoration.

As we contemplate our relationship with Europe today, so 100 years ago we looked to our responsibilities as well as our fears; our concern for others as well as our concerns for ourselves. We are what we are, for better or for worse. How we *present* ourselves to others is another matter. Those who fought at the Somme were mostly young and had little of life other than childhood to reflect upon. Many were idealistic, a few even enjoyed the experience of living on the edge, most were in some way galvanised by the vast operation of which they were a minuscule part. There was in the hearts of soldiers a degree of not wanting to let down their mates, of an idealism that we may see today as naive, of a trust that this was a just and righteous campaign. They were caught up in a battle that was a horror to all who took part, and men were led by those for whom duty and loyalty demanded sacrifice, and leadership meant being the one to not only share the danger of those who followed you, but preferring death and injury, before that of others.

So this colossal battle of human suffering was shared - as men fell injured and dying at the Somme - in families in the quiet lanes and villages of Ireland, in this and other cities. Those who, like us, have walked the hills and played on the sports fields, who have worked on the land or in factories, shipyard or wherever, both those who fought and those who remained, included those who lived distant from the action and helpless and desperately anxious that their lives wouldn’t be torn apart for ever: women, children, parents, grandparents; as the guns rattled their deadly hail and soldiers pressed on, not even able to offer succour to their friends who fell beside them. Orders were to leave the wounded to the medical teams and stretcher parties behind. One rifleman wrote, “The vision of radiant manhood tramping undaunted towards the life-searing heat of the flame of conflict, impressed itself deeply on my receptive mind, and has ever remained a symbol to strive after….. Unity born of understanding, achievement through mutual striving! This is the pregnant message that those about to die flung to the legions that would follow them. Will it ever be understood, I wonder?”

One hundred years on we are left contemplating that understanding, and in the context of worship, and the huge loss of life from this Province and across the island of Ireland, not forgetting those who suffered terrible, life-changing injuries and psychological and mental distress, we pause to consider, and in the silence, reflect. For the Christian, we believe that we are ourselves under judgement for our actions and words, indeed for our very attitudes and thoughts, but at the same time, we pray for the mind of Christ. In fact, Saint Paul writes to the Corinthian Church concerning spiritual discernment; we too must weigh-up our actions.  So as we seek the mind of Christ, we desire to discern and understand and not simply recall.

When the exiled prophet Daniel received his revelation of God as the Ancient One, as related in the Old Testament lesson, as he prayed in Babylon, amidst all the visionary description, what we draw from it is an image of God that in so many ways reminds us that we are not trying to glimpse something from a different age and a different culture, but to gain an understanding of something beyond our experience and the finite capacity of our minds; that allows us an insight into our own lives and attitudes. Daniel saw God in majesty and veneration, not in senility and decline, even though he, Daniel, languished in exile and his country lay in ruins.

So we think, “How do we understand?” “How do we remember?” We remember largely by telling the human story, by projecting what we know onto the screen of our own experience. We look at words and pictures; listen to first-hand accounts and feel the emotional drive of those who left these shores and their families and their homes and their security, who dreamt of a world of stability and beauty in a situation that was far from those things, and so endured what they had to endure with courage and resilience, because whatever the rights and wrongs of the bigger picture, this is close to home; it’s about who I am and what I hold dear. So a hundred years on we remember the human cost from a perspective of relative safety and security. That demands of us a recognition of, in the words of today’s Psalm, that “Thou, Lord, hast brought my soul out of hell, thou hast kept my life from them that go down to the pit.” Daniel faced Jerusalem as he prayed; Jesus sat with his disciples on the Mount of Olives and looked across the Kidron valley to the temple in Jerusalem and *they both knew that human hands cannot build what needs to be built*. We can construct trenches and build watchtowers; cross barbed wire and face the guns of an enemy, live in dreadful conditions and contemplate how death might be close, but as we apply our understanding of the mind of Christ to the judgement of all of this, what are we left with, but the deep desire to see no human life as wasted; to bring order to chaos and the terrible consequences of conflict acknowledged and felt, as peace is contemplated and healing brought out of injury.

Second Lieutenant Arthur Young of 7th Irish Fusiliers wrote in a long letter on 9th September to an aunt: ‘Can you wonder …. that I felt a sort of sickening dread of the horrors which I knew we should all have to go through? Frankly, I was dismayed. But … I know that you will think the more of me when I tell you, on my conscience, that I went into action that afternoon, not with any hope of glory, but with the absolute certainty of death. How the others felt, I don’t exactly know, but I don’t think that I am far wrong when I say that their emotions were not far different from mine.’

This was later in the battle, just before the tanks began to be deployed, but let us return to those first few days for the same recognition of the closeness of death is apparent from the start, and find our commemoration resting upon the premise that such acceptance of sacrifice, though of itself noble and high-minded, should never have been expected of so many for so little. We learn from the pages of history when those pages are illuminated by the witness of those who were there. Our judgement must surely be that in our day we will strive for the peace that is costly *in the energy needed to reach it* by indefatigable negotiation based on the common good of our shared humanity, with conflict as the final resort - as Northern Ireland has sought to achieve within itself, and must continue to seek and achieve - with much help from outside; and learn from the immense, incalculable sacrifice of the Somme and other battles of the First World War. If such a lesson saves lives in our day, then at least we pay more than lip-service to the deaths of many others. May God in his mercy grant us and all humanity the path to peace.

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