

A sermon preached on Remembrance Sunday (10 November 2019) in St. Macartin's Cathedral, Enniskillen.

Go raibh na foclaí uilig a deirim libh in anim Dia bheo, an t-Athair, an Mac agus an Spiorad Naomh. Áiméan.

May all the words that I say to you be in the Name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

"Let justice roll down like waters; and righteousness like an ever rolling stream." Amos 5:24

On the clasp of the general service medal that was issued to all soldiers, sailors and airmen a short time after the end of the First World War are the words "The Great War for Civilisation 1914-19". So that is what the War Office at least thought the people who received that medal were fighting for. Civilisation.

The Great War was also a great trauma which stunned the conscience of many European countries and it wasn't until they were standing on the verge of another world crisis in the 1930s that serious people began to ask what had really happened in 1914 and the build up to it. By and large they were people who had fought in that war but who were now a bit sceptical about what benefits had flowed from it.

And they began to ask "exactly what sort of civilisation had carried the Great War in its womb"? We can see with hindsight that the war was a long time in the making as the two European nations (Germany and the United Kingdom) whose political and religious life owed most to the Reformation, pulled on either end of the rope of international rivalry until the knot was so tight that it couldn't be undone. It could only be cut.

Germany was admired throughout Europe, including in the United Kingdom, as the most civilised country in the world. It had the beginnings of a welfare state long before any other European country. It had a heritage in music, literature and drama unequalled since those of Italy during the Renaissance of the fifteenth century. It had mighty industries and great trade; all the rhythm and order of progress; magnificent Churches, and in Lutheranism a national religion. Great glories, great records, great prospects.

But deep within itself it had also a frail seam and an old wound, which, as is so often the case in individuals and in nations, expressed itself not as weakness, but as a belief in its own exceptionalism and its special place in history. And the United Kingdom of those days also shared many of these characteristics. At the time of the Great War, on any scale of judgement, the UK was less successful than Germany had been in adjusting to, or indeed shaping, the modern world of the twentieth century. But with two notable exceptions; Britain (or at least England) had been a unified nation with a common culture for much longer than Germany; and, as an island nation, it had built up a much greater Navy. And it was around naval strength that a rivalry developed with Germany which escalated into poisonous competitiveness which eventually led to war. That is where the diplomacy of two of the most sophisticated chancelleries in the world foundered.

And when you look back on the pronouncements and actions of the Churches at that time (churches and religion were a great deal more important in the affairs of nations than they are now) you see evidence of our own fatal flaws which contributed to the causes of the war. The flaw of teaching people to think of God as their chief asset rather than as their eternal Judge. To want God to be on our side, rather than to take care that we are on his. The State had an important place for God. And they kept him in his place. And that place was to glorify the nation and not to vindicate and hallow His Name before all the nations of the earth. And to our shame both before and since the churches have abetted that sacrilege.

All war and all conflict between nations are failures of diplomacy. That is as true today as it was in the run up to the Great War. And a failure of diplomacy is a failure to talk sympathetically, intelligibly and truthfully across national boundaries. But that failure begins at home when Governments delude their own people and perhaps even delude themselves into unreal assessments of their virtues and vices. It happens when a certain type of political pharisaism is allowed to develop. Pharisaism ends in hypocrisy but it doesn't begin there. It doesn't begin in conscious duplicity but in an unconscious unreality, which makes false estimates of the

world and of its own powers. It derives from a self confidence that has never had its confidence shaken. It is not a disease of the mind but of the soul. It is so far removed from the true data of life that it doesn't even suspect just how unreal it is. And it can be as deadly in political or civic life now as it was in religious and civic life in Germany in 1914.

In these islands with our history of democracy and cautious governance and close diplomacy, conflict across our borders or international conflict of any kind only takes place when we start to talk to one another with the candour of a friend but without the kindness of a brother. It happens too when those who are responsible (generally our civil servants) for guarding the treasury of wisdom in policy making and governance become politicised, or afraid to offer governments the accumulated institutional wisdom at their disposal, leavened by their own sober and mature judgement.

For the past two hundred years almost all wars have also arisen from a failure to understand the destructive power of a certain type of nationalism. In the Great War and in others since, the state has managed to do something which the churches had been trying and failing to do for many years-to get young people to rally to its cause; in the case of the state the cause of the nation. In 1914 young people flocked to join up.

In 1914 that was a considerable achievement. Forget the Edwardian poise of Downton Abbey. In the years leading up to 1914 the UK was a particularly vulnerable and unstable society. Labour was organising itself more and more effectively and pushing back against the laws and judgements that had disabled it as a political force for so long. Industrialisation had moved into a new and very chaotic phase (not unlike the chaos capitalism which is today crouched in the wings waiting for its moment). There was a feeling also in the years leading up to the Great War that the young were rebellious and discontented. Yet alongside their discontentedness and urge to rebel there lay another instinct for order and for disciplined action. An instinct and a desire for a great cause to be served by a great sacrifice.

And by talking about the nation in a language which should have been reserved only for God, the church to some degree sawed through the branch on which it was sitting and had nothing else to offer when the war ended and the steady decline in numbers and in ethical power (which continues to this day) began.

But now with all our advantages of being able to see further along the great arc of history than our ancestors could, it is clear that, above all else, it is a nation which carries injustice in its womb which will find its nemesis in conflict. That injustice may be in relation to other nations. Wanting to be "first" in a way that means others must be second or third and should be glad to be so. Wanting to be "great" in a way which belittles others and requires them to defer to all that makes for the greatness of the great.

But there is also a reckoning and a judgement for those nations which allow any internal injustice to persist for too long. Injustice that requires many of their citizens to live in austere circumstances or in an unfriendly environment. Or countries that devote their best efforts and their best minds to maintaining an economic system that has at its principal foundation the reef of sand called "asset values", particularly the value of houses, while thousands of their citizens have no where to lay their heads, no permanent home in which to build up their family life, or to realise the little dreams of domestic security which are the beating heart of truly democratic societies. Or a society which is deeply divided and frankly sectarian but where parties of power see advantage in division and reinforce it. Or a society which can see the continued anguish of people like those who suffered in this town 32 years ago but who have not the compassionate will to face up to the practical remedies for that suffering.

If the dairies and letters of the private soldiers from this island (every one a volunteer) and from Great Britain are anything to go by, the redress of injustice is at the core of the civilisation they fought for.

In his own day the prophet Amos could see these injustices and the consequences of them very clearly, which is why his words have a meaning far beyond their original context. He lived in a postwar world. Israel had been engaged in a costly war with Syria which had gone very badly at first but the tide had turned and after victory came unparalleled prosperity rather as happened in Western Europe after World War Two.

And as he made his way through the country Amos saw people living well and eating well. It was like nothing they had ever had before. They had never had it so good. There were magnificent houses with

panelled rooms and tremendous social life. Indeed Amos even remarks on the fact that many people had summer houses too.

But he also noticed another Israel; a darker side of the picture. Not all Israel shared in this new affluence. There were people in need and when they cried for justice they found that justice cost money, which they didn't have. That's why they needed justice! And the wealthy and the king didn't seem to care. In fact at their worst they deliberately exploited the poor who had to spend a far higher proportion of the little they had on necessities. And Amos even noted that affluence had a detrimental effect on the rich. It made them spiritually poor.

Amos message was quite simply this: God takes no pleasure in people who pay him homage in his sanctuary if they do not work to right the wrongs of the world outside. And that goes for today as with every other day. God refuses to hear their liturgies, the prayers they offer, the hymns they sing. Instead he demands that the world is flooded with justice.

*I hate and despise your feasts,
And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies*

*let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever flowing stream*

Amos warned people about yearning for the Day of the Lord as though it was to be a day of contentment when it was really to be a day of reckoning and of judgement on injustice. Of sifting out the hearts of men and societies before his judgement seat. The world gets a long time to redress its injustices and to pay its debt to those unjustly dealt with. But it is Amos' witness that all the accounts are kept, lest if anything be forgotten there might be something unforgiven, unredeemed, unjust still.

Injustice is also the greatest tragedy of war. Some people make mistakes and other people pay the price. And it is principally the people who paid the price who we remember and pay tribute to today; but we do so in the face of a God of holy love who makes demands of us who do the remembering. We need to be careful that he is as pleased with us as we are with ourselves.

We do not know what was in the minds of those young men from this parish whose names are on the roll of honour; of in the minds of the 5260 men from the Inniskillings who died in the First World War; or in the minds of the many millions from all over Europe who died in the Great War. What was in their minds when the "rallied to the colours" or when they completed their training. Or when they first saw action, or first experienced fear. Or when they saw friends and comrades die or faced the hour of death themselves. We simply do not know. But we do know that to have done as they did must have taken extraordinary courage and perseverance and, probably cheerfulness too.

And we also know that 1919 wasn't the end of it. It wasn't the war to end all wars. We know that the campaign between good and evil drags on and that the evil world will not win in the end because in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (the greatest battle ever fought and the highest price ever offered and paid) it failed to win the only time it ever could. That in the cross of the Son of God all the wickedness and sin of the world lost its chief servant-death- which became the minster of eternal life for millions in the Great War and who we remember today, and for a countless multitude before and since. Thanks be to God.

+John Clogher