

Remembrance Sunday, 11th November 2018

Just over three years ago, I was asked by the Abbot (who tends to ask me to do things!) to speak at some sort of conference organised by St Michael's, the local hospice, on the perhaps unsurprising theme of 'life after death'. The conference took place just outside of Ledbury, so not a million miles from here, and I joined a panel of speakers, representing a variety of beliefs: a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Humanist, an Anglican, and of course a Catholic. The poor old Humanist, for obvious reasons, did not have much to say on the subject: basically, we don't believe in it! I cannot, however, recall what the others had to say on 'life after death', all except for the Anglican, the fellow Christian on the panel.

While my presentation was somewhat doctrinal, explaining the Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell, together with Purgatory, the Anglican simply talked about a change in his tradition's attitude towards the dead, specifically regarding prayers for the dead. And what caused this change of attitude? Precisely what we are now commemorating: the 'Great War', which came to an end one hundred years ago today. It was, of course, not known then as the 'First World War', since there was still no 'Second'. The horrific bloodshed of the Great War marked as such a real watershed in the lives of individuals and the history of peoples. A change poignantly reflected in the music of local composer, Sir Edward Elgar: the lyrical Violin Concerto of 1910 giving way to the elegiac Cello Concerto of 1919.

The Great War indeed marked a watershed in people's attitude towards death and the dead by the way death was so immediate and mass-produced on a truly industrial scale; the division between the dead and the living, as a result, became somewhat blurred. There was, unfortunately, a rise in Spiritualism; people seeking to communicate with their loved ones through séances. And yet, as the Anglican speaker at the hospice conference pointed out, there was now also a desire to help the dead through prayer; since death had come so suddenly and devastatingly people felt that they really had to do something. Hence, the annual Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday, which we are of course celebrating today, a hundred years on.

For us Catholics, remembering the dead in the month of November is certainly no new thing; All Souls' Day taking place, as it does, on the second of this month. And, obviously, praying for the departed in general is hardly anything new or indeed prayer specifically for those fallen in battle, as today's Epistle from the second book of Maccabees clearly demonstrated. Judas Maccabeus prayed for the fallen by having a collection (again, nothing new to us Catholics!): "for sacrifice to be offered for the sins of the dead, thinking well and religiously concerning the resurrection, (For if he had not hoped that they that were slain should rise again, it would have seemed superfluous and vain to pray for the dead [...]) It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins" (2 M 12:43-44, 46).

Similarly, for us, the most effective way of praying for the dead is, by doing what we are doing this afternoon: offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass "for the sins of the dead, thinking well and religiously concerning the resurrection" (2 M 12:43). The Mass as such brings into play something, or rather someone, we have so far not (in this homily at least) mentioned. Yes, we have mentioned prayer and even life after death, though not in fact Christ, nor indeed God! The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, however, is all about the sacrifice of Christ, the sacrifice of the Cross, "*IN REMISSIONEM PECCATORUM (FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS)*".



If Judas Maccabeus thought that the costly sacrifices (costing twelve thousand drachmas of silver) he arranged to be offered in Jerusalem would be effective “for the sins of the dead”; how much more should we believe that the sacrifice of Christ himself, made present this afternoon at Mass, will be effective for those who have died in war. And if the great Old Testament warrior thought “well and religiously concerning the resurrection”; how much more should we hope in the resurrection of these same dead, now that Christ has indeed risen from the dead. The death and resurrection of Our Lord not only helps us to believe in life after death; it helps us to help those who have already died and gone before us, through the offering of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

The Anglican speaker, speaking after me about the afterlife, picked up my point about Purgatory. The passage from the second book of Maccabees, which we read in the Epistle, is as such one of the key texts of Scripture for proving the existence of Purgatory. And although I did not actually mention Maccabees, since it is consigned by Protestants to the Apocrypha (and I didn’t have much time anyway to talk on the vast topic of life after death), I did however refer to praying for those in Purgatory. While expressing a typically vague assent to some kind of purification after death, the Anglican also linked it to the practice of assisting the dead through prayer, though not of course through the Mass. The notion of an intermediate state, between death and Heaven, in fact made increasing sense following the horrors of the Great War. How could so many people’s eternal fate, Heaven or Hell, be enacted so swiftly?

The fairly attractive vision of Purgatory in *The Dream of Gerontius*, written by Bl John Henry Newman and set to music by Elgar (and I will indeed be vested in the black cope used at his funeral during the Absolution after Mass), also softened people’s attitude towards it. While there has been, over the last century, a greater appreciation of Purgatory among other Christians, the reverse unfortunately seems to be the case among Catholics themselves. “Purgatory is some embarrassing legacy from the dark old days of the Middle Ages, isn’t it?”!

On this very special Remembrance Sunday, let us, however, continue to remember, and indeed pray for, those who have died in war: that they may find lasting peace. *Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine. Et lux perpetua luceat eis. Requiescant in pace. Amen.*