

Commemorating World War 1 - the use of language

The concern I have developed regarding the forthcoming commemoration of the start of World War 1 was triggered by a letter from the government to faith communities inviting them to be involved. The letter specifically referred to a proposed event on August 4th in Westminster Abbey but of course by extension invited faith communities to be involved with the whole period of commemoration. This was placed on the agenda of the Free Churches Group meeting in April 2013 just after the letter was received.

Government initiatives have developed since then but the focus remains on encouraging as many parts of society as possible to join in the commemoration, including making it possible for school children to visit the battlefields. There are places where a museum exists including part of a trench still kept as it would have been along with collections of equipment, photographs and so on. On one level it is clear that children will have the chance to discover what being involved in the war was like and will be given the statistics of loss of life just as the rest of us are reminded year by year on Remembrance Sunday but what values will be promoted alongside this? The focus of the commemoration is not simply on the educational aspect for children however and from a rigorous Christian point of view it is surely essential that we approach the forthcoming period with great caution and rigorous theology.

There will, as I have said, be an emphasis on the terrible loss of life that was experienced, no one could get away with not acknowledging that but there will be a number of agendas focussed in a variety of ways on national pride and identity and down that path lay many temptations and dangers.

What I found myself focussing on very quickly was the importance of the use of language.

Is this a commemoration and what does that mean? What about the language of victory or defeat and how might that become loaded with idea of one side right and the other wrong? What about the deeper meanings of peace, justice and reconciliation and how open are these terms and others to accidental or deliberate manipulation?

The most obvious use that I have recognised so far and which I questioned at the meeting of the Free Churches Group was a use that has been common recently, the phrase 'those who gave their lives'. Sometimes that is more neutrally put as 'those who lost their lives'. But it is important to reflect on when 'lost' is used and when 'gave' is used and when a switch may reflect or may be intended to create a subtle shift in emphasis.

A few years ago I watched a performance of 'Oh! What a lovely War' in which my son played General Hague and I remember being focussed on the thought that there were millions of young men who rather than giving their lives had actually had their lives taken away from them and I reflect that it was not popular then and is not popular now to put it that way. There are deeper question of how the whole thing might have been avoided and whose responsibility it was and of how it is possible to change a culture that allows politicians and military leaders to be able to think only in strategic terms, like a chess player who may sacrifice a pawn or two in order to win the game and there are those who would rather those questions were not asked.

I will be surprised in the commemorations if we hear the phrase 'lives taken away' used rather than 'lives lost' or 'lives given' so the challenge for the church and for other faith groups is to do what the Churches eventually succeeded in doing with the abolition of slavery, to de-legitimise the use of certain terms and certain concepts.

I cannot help but reflect on what happened when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire with the resulting of the legitimisation of certain concepts and the de-legitimation of others. We must discuss the theology of the Just War and whether it is still fit for purpose as a

legitimation of the whole military culture of the present time. It is a question for deep and serious discussion with huge implications for the development of weapons technology among other things.

But I want to return to the question of language and the use of language. There is of course more to be said about it because there were many thousands of young men who enthusiastically signed up on a wave of patriotic fervour, spurred on by the language of the posters and politicians appealing to their patriotism. Perhaps the argument could be made that no one really grasped what kind of war it might become, neither in the villages and towns of Britain nor in the government offices of Westminster but that response is not good enough. There was plenty of experience around already of 'modern' warfare to know what kind of carnage it could produce and from a Christian perspective, just how difficult any application of Just War principles had already become. In popular culture, however, the idea of serving your country was and remains strong along with the strong sense of approval and love of country that goes with it and the approbation that goes with appearing to be disloyal. Recently we can see the attempts to describe Ralph Milliband as someone who hated the country that had given him sanctuary and the disreputable way in which this kind of language has been used. All of this 'dynamic' is used to take precedence over any careful theological or humanist reflection on the exercise of responsible power over people's lives or deaths.

I am sure that there will be a good deal of careful use of language in the commemorations that will be engineered in certain quarters to create the desired balance of regret at the huge loss of life on the one hand but admiration for all those heroes who gave their lives in defence of their country on the other and deeper questions beyond certain boundaries will be discouraged. Surely part of the responsibility of the church is to say that there are no boundaries beyond which it is right to ask questions about causes and responsibilities and consequences.

Change the language to 'lives taken away' and it becomes much more uncomfortable. Who took them away? Was it the enemy or the politicians and strategists who simply played with numbers and refused to see human beings, who were concerned with power politics and their own advantage or disadvantage and did not see themselves in any real sense as servants of ordinary people rather than being in control?

It is dangerously tempting to say that we have come a long way since 1914-1918 and made progress because in some senses we have. We no longer execute people for cowardice in battle. We understand the problems of post traumatic stress disorder but we still exclude disabled soldiers from victory parades in case it spoils the effect just as Margaret Thatcher did at the end of the Falklands campaign, just as Elizabeth the First had done after the defeat of the Spanish Armada where the maimed and dying sailors were packed on the streets of the Plymouth Barbican while the partying went on up the hill and the priests gave thanks to God for the victory.

It would be good to believe that the Church has got better at choosing what to bless and what not to bless but it can be patchy. At the end of the Falklands campaign, though, the service in St Paul's reputedly infuriated Margaret Thatcher because it had a tone of reconciliation rather than victory and regretted the loss of life on both sides. Once again that was a lot to do with the use of language and again I want to say that the most important role that the churches can play in this period of commemoration will be to keep asking awkward questions about the use of language and the adequacy of the depth of discussion the language take us to. What do we mean by reconciliation and peace? Does it simply mean saying sorry and being able to live together again or does it actually mean understanding what created the conflict and violence in the first place and digging deep into issues of power, the sharing of resources, the dynamics of national identity and so on and properly understanding them and then making appropriate decisions that may cost us money or affect our lifestyle but won't in the end cost us untold lives or take us into a morality where we can shut our eyes to what we are doing because we are doing it using drones or getting our machines to fight our wars for us. Do we confine our reflection to the period of the war without applying it in our present time.

One of the results of the impact of the First World War has been for strategists and military technicians to work at creating means of delivering mayhem that do not mean that our side has to be brought home in body bags but at the same time not caring how many body bags the other side needs. We might say that the development of nuclear weapons is an example of that, especially as they were used at the end of the Second World War but that is such an exceptional example that it stands in a category of its own with a unique set of issues especially relating to the concept of deterrence. Better examples are the well known and currently hotly debated issue of the use of drones as weapons and not simply for reconnaissance. A less well known example is of the development of the BLU-82 daisy cutter bomb. This is an explosive device that explodes on a more or less two dimensional plain and will obliterate everything over a 600 yard diameter area. It was first used in Vietnam and has formed a significant component of the 'shock and awe' military philosophy. What can one say from a Christian point of view except , 'how in heavens name does such a weapon fit within the Just War concept' and 'so much for loving your enemy'?

It seems to me that as we prepare resources for this period, one of the things that is needed is a comprehensive overview of how all the relevant aspects interconnect and then from a Christian point of view, what the theological input is to the discussion.

I mentioned nationalism / national security / national identity as one of the factors and that is a high profile issue one way or the other these days and is a very good example of where the use of terms actually demands deep and careful understanding. I have sometimes wondered what future generations might look back on our time and say ' how could they possibly have seen that as important?' and I hope that one of the things they will say that about will be our obsession with national pride before our sense of being one race on one world.

We have a significant challenge and opportunity during the period that is approaching almost effectively to restate many of the core values of the Christian faith, to really be the salt for the world that Jesus told his followers they should be. If we do it properly we will not make ourselves popular but to be true to the gospel of peace and to the Prince of Peace, it is a challenge we must not shirk.

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