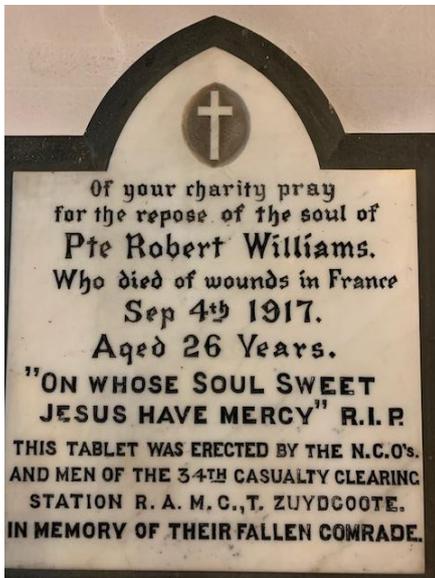


Homily for Remembrance Sunday 2020



I don't know why, but we have only one name in the church of a soldier who died in the First World War. There must have been more, but only Private Robert Williams is on the wall. Every year the family still remember him with a Mass and in other ways. There is nothing remarkable about him as soldiers go. No VC, no medals, no mention in despatches. In fact he was not right at the front when he died but killed by a

bomb in Zuydcoote near Dunkirk, in 1917. He was an ordinary soldier. He was in the Medical Corps, an orderly in the Sergeants' Mess, always cheerful apparently and he used to cut hair for the others and do shaves, those were his gifts.

You could fill the wall with names, some no doubt much better known even famous, but just to have his name is somehow fine. He represents so many ordinary people for us.

Most of the people we remember today are just like Private Williams. I am not sure how much he knew about the causes of the war, whether he volunteered or was called up, he probably joined in a recruiting drive in November 1914 in Kendal. He certainly had no great role in the war's resolution. But one way or other his community, his government, his fellow citizens, asked him to do something for them, and both he and they were well aware that it might cost him his life, which it did. The responsibility lay chiefly with those who asked, or ordered, and we are their descendants.

Regardless of your opinion of war or the armed forces, whether one voted for a war or not, perhaps even demonstrated against a war, there is a shared responsibility to remember what our society asks of people. When reading the story of Robert Williams, you cannot shrug your shoulders and say, 'It isn't my responsibility.' It is all of ours.

Remembrance Day is full of patriotism. On any other year there would be red poppies, flags, bands, marching, plenty of Union Jacks. There is nothing wrong with patriotism at its best. But if we fail to remember that it comes with responsibility, then we fail to understand what the point of remembering is about.

In Robert Williams' day there was talk of fighting the 'war to end all wars.' We know only too well that that was not the result. Since our own experience of the Second World War and then the Korean War, we have been fortunate to avoid direct warfare in this country. But though it may be pretty peaceful in our small corner of the world, we cannot ignore that fact that war is a reality for much of the world still. To say 'Well, at least it is not world-wide,' is to ignore the fact that there is plenty happening right now that could take us to a global war very swiftly.

Let's remember two things today. That we have a real and current responsibility to look after those who have suffered in war. The film 'Born on the 4th of July' shows what happens when we ignore veterans, in that case Vietnam veterans in America. Much has been done, but there is still a long way to go in the care for those who have been caught up in war, military and civilian.

The second thing is to reflect on is our need to work continuously for peace.

The world around us today, Europe and elsewhere, is increasingly becoming a place of self-centred countries and communities where we believe we need to look after ourselves first. As long as **we** are all right, there is no need to look over our borders. But how quickly a small incident takes us into major conflict. I doubt Robert Williams had the faintest idea where Sarajevo or Serbia were. He probably had never travelled far from Westmorland, and yet one shot in the distant Balkans lead to his death.

The gospel today reminds us to be vigilant and well-prepared. Wise bridesmaids. For a Christian and others, this does not mean being well stocked with weapons, it means making the right moves to calm any situation, to help to alleviate those circumstances where poverty, oppression, fear of lack of resources such as water, competition for them, and dictatorial megalomania, might lead to conflict. To be generously alert to any cry for help. To accept our global responsibilities, the needs of our brothers and sisters, those who inhabit our common home.

The second reading is a common one for funerals, which reminds us that it is natural to grieve, but that we should do so with the hope Christ has given us, hope in the resurrection.

When we remember the loss of so many in war, we can yet do so with hope for the future, provided we realise that we not only need to have faith, but to act on it as well.