

Homily for 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Remembrance Sunday

If you go into St. Peter's in Rome, turn left and go past the memorial to the Stuart kings, on your left in an alcove you will find a statue to Pope Benedict XV, sometimes called as the 'Unknown Pope.' Benedict was elected on 3rd September 1914 just as the First World War was breaking out and very soon he realised what a disaster was unfolding. In his first letter he says: 'There is no limit to the measure of ruin and of slaughter, day by day the earth is drenched in blood and covered with bodies of the wounded and the slain.' He used the first Christmas to plead for a cease-fire which was ignored by all the powers, as were his related requests for peace.

But he never gave up, both in trying to achieve a peace and to look at the roots of what had happened. He saw these in nationalism, racism and class conflict.

"There is a contempt for authority (by which he means respect for a rule above us that controls our selfish actions), injustice in the relations between the classes (a lack of respect for the poor and the life of the ordinary soldier), the desire for the attainment of material goods made into the sole objective of human activity, and a striving after independence that has no regard for others.

All the good in us that would make us reflect on the loss of life, the destruction of people's way of life, the recognition of any power but human acquisitiveness, greed, whether for goods or land or power, had been lost. And so chaos erupted in an almost unstoppable way.

If you have seen 'All Quiet of the Western Front,' the old or the recent version, you see how people were worked up into a fever that wiped away their desire to live in peace and instead flocked to join or support the war effort. It is only when one person is face to face with another to kill each other, that the reality starts to sink in. Why are we doing this? As Pope Benedict repeatedly quoted in his encyclical letters: 'A new commandment I give unto you, that you love on another.'

Today's gospel speaks about times of disaster, and in each war people have said: 'We must now be at the end of the world.' But Luke makes it clear that we never will know the time, whatever horrors are taking place. But what the gospel does make clear is that for us, as Christians, living through times like that, means they are for us "an opportunity to bear witness."

So when we come across war, as we do today, or strife in any form, our role is not to be thinking 'Is this the end of the world?' focussing on ourselves, but rather, 'How do I bear witness to Jesus Christ in this situation.' 'Thinking of the commandment to love, what is my part?'

Remembering those who have died is one thing that we do this weekend, and on 11th November each year, and we pray for them and for peace.

For Benedict he was able to help a great deal afterwards. One thing he did was to instigate the Feast of the Death of the Holy Innocents on December 28th when he saw the need of orphaned children throughout Europe and the work of the Save the Children charity began. That feast was a time of prayer and to collect for the charity.

As Pope he could do much. Each of us may have less obvious reach and power. But as we remember those who have fallen both in that First World War and others since, let us think what we can do. How do I bear witness to Jesus' commandment:

'Love one another as I have loved you?'