

Remembrance Sunday 2020 St Matthews Westminster

Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather

That's the original lyric of the famous hymn written by John Bunyan, 'He who would valiant be...' I've quoted the original as I'd like to home in on the rather old fashioned word in the first line, 'Who would true *valour* see'. It's a word that comes with a cluster of other old fashioned notions, like –gallantry, honour, spirit. All words that describe courage but are not synonymous with it. They describe a *quality* of courage. The sort that attaches itself to a young hero – Roland for example, the chap who failed to blow his horn in time, and was killed at Ronceveaux.

Roland is an attractive character and. in chanson, painting, and stained glass he rides in a world of clear colours and eternal youth. And the point is, *is* that where gallantry and valour reside – in art? Are real soldiers anything like that? Do gallantry and valour occur in real war, and if they do, are they virtues that should be admired or practised by Christians?

Earlier centuries would have been astonished at the question. The image of the Christian soldier, fighting for Christendom, civilisation and decency is embedded deep in our culture. (*ad lib*) In fact so simple was the equation between military duty and Christian behaviour that an Anglican naval chaplain in the Dutch wars awarded a DD for 'conspicuous gallantry in action'.

But how do we feel about that now? After the trenches and high explosives of the First World War. The blanket bombing of the second. The endless attrition of mechanised conflict in the 21st century?

Let me offer you two servicemen.

The first is my father. A young officer in the RN who was on the Malta convoys, served in every major sea battle of WWII, and was shipwrecked 4 times. He couldn't swim. My father couldn't bear Remembrance

Sunday – all those young servicemen in their Number Ones, looking exactly like their dead counterparts. He had some sort of crisis in 1944, got confirmed in Bombay, and put in for non combatant duties. Dad commanded a mine sweeper for the rest of the war – (*ad lib*) which was . actually a more dangerous job. But anything was better than blowing ships out of the water and sending other sailors into the arms of their common enemy, the Sea.

And then there is Colonel Peter Rogers. A cousin of a friend of mine. He was a cavalry officer, served with the Blue and Royals, and went on to command the Household Cavalry. He saw action in all the dangerous parts of the earth from Northern Ireland to Kosovo and was conspicuous for his daring, his comradeship – and an innocent and rather endearing vanity; everybody mentioned it, and loved him for it. He was famous for putting side mirrors on his Centurion tank, which everybody thought was a brilliant idea, until somebody got into Pete’s seat and found the mirrors were there to reflect *him*, not the movements of the tank behind.

Two very different men, but loyal servicemen, and sincere Christians. My father was buried with the white Ensign draped over his coffin, Pete’s memorial service was held in the Guards’ chapel. Both were laid to rest with traditional Anglican liturgies, and leafing through the different service books I was struck by the untroubled simplicity of the prayers.

Here is Colonel Pete’s regimental collect:

O Lord Jesus Christ who by thy Holy Apostle has called us to put on the armour of God, and to take the sword of the Spirit, give thy grace we pray thee, to the Blues and Royals that we may fight manfully under thy banner against all evil, and waiting on thee to renew our strength, may mount up with wings as eagles, in thy name, who livest and reigneth... and so on...

With that prayer in my head, I turned with interest to the psalm appointed for the service. Not a bellicose one, nothing about the God of battles, training our fingers to war, just a good plain description of the honest man... (Ps 15, Prayer Book)

‘He that... doeth the thing which is right, and speaketh the truth from his heart.... He that sweareth unto his neighbour, and disappointeth him not : though it were to his own hindrance....’

And reading that psalm, you realise the honest man is not unlike a soldier. He looks you straight in the eye, he sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not – because he is steadfast, loyal and valiant.

These are admirable qualities and, if they attach themselves to soldiers and sailors, they attach themselves just as naturally to peaceful folk – like you and me. Our Lord himself warns us that He’s sending us out like sheep amongst wolves, and at the very end, at the Last Supper, tells the 12 to pack their swords. Colonel Pete would have approved. But Jesus also recommends the equally difficult courage of principled passivity – turning the other cheek, enduring to the end – *ad lib* as it were scooping mines out of the Indian ocean... And, at the crisis of His life, He allows Himself to be arrested, manhandled and killed.

What are we to make of this?

Well, every Gospel incident has to be seen in context, and we mustn’t mix up metaphor with literal instruction – but what strikes me is the vigour and energy, of even Jesus’ quietest actions. He can’t go to sleep without a storm raging round Him. He conceives the life of a shepherd as one of almost constant warfare, and His simplest sayings often have a brutal directness: does your eye offend you? pluck it out! Do you want to follow me, pick up that gibbet and come along. Does someone steal your coat – give him your jacket. These are the sayings of a man of action – but they’re also the sayings of a man who could suddenly stop. Jesus doesn’t give an *inch* in His discussions with the lawyers and Pharisees, but at His trial He refuses to defend Himself, and before His accusers is dumb.

Jesus’ attitude to combat is complex, but His admiration for faith and courage is a given. He loved the faith of the chaps who rolled back that roof to lower in a stretcher case, He commended the Roman centurion who’s servant He healed. And it’s those qualities we honour today. Of

course war is a nightmare, Flanders Field was a horror, but courage and clarity – and gallantry – are admirable. And they are astonishingly and humbly, exemplified in the lives of those service men and women who have died for our freedom.

There is a world of military valour out there – and it is extolled in the Scriptures. St Paul telling us to put on the whole armour of faith, warning us that our warfare is with mighty spiritual powers, St Peter describing our enemy, like a roaring lion prowling around – whom resist, steadfast in faith. These are qualities proper to even the meekest of us. We are embarrassed by ‘Onward Christian soldiers’ nowadays – but not, thank goodness, by St Patrick’s breastplate. The men of the Blues and Royals sing this hymn with an uncomplicated application to their ordinary job – but it isn’t a bad description of our fight either – that battle we were enrolled in at our baptism, against the world, the flesh and the devil...

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight
 Be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might:
 Be thou my soul’s shelter, be thou my strong tower
 O raise me thou heavenward, great power of my power.

Or as the collect says,

Lord, give us grace we pray, that we may fight under thy banner against all evil, and waiting on thee to renew our strength, may mount up with wings as eagles, in thy Name, who livest and reigneth world without end,
 Amen