

“Christmas Lights” - Remembrance Sunday (2011)

As I stepped out of Tottenham Court Rd Station this week onto the business of Oxford St, I immediately saw the bright Christmas Lights and my first thought was ‘We’ve not even had Remembrance Sunday.’

I always feel terribly presumptuous preaching on this day. I have not fought for my country or been close to any battle. Perhaps it would be best, in the face of loss and heroism, simply to remain silent and pray. But then again, on behalf of us all, there should be words of respect and thanks. We stand immensely in debt to those who, right up to our day, have gone to war. Some went eagerly, others terrified and, as they died, they probably thought first of their families and mates but we are the beneficiaries of their sacrifice. God forbid we should ever forget.

And by keeping today, we are, of course, not attempting to glamorise war. In fact, the ceremony, the poppies and the prayers are an attempt to bring order and calm to memories of chaos and loss. War is not beautiful and so we try to make this moment beautiful. The courage and selflessness of our armed forces is humbling but they do not pretend that the battlefield is glorious.

A soldier who killed his first enemy combatant in Afghanistan in 2006 said this:

Afterwards I sat there and I thought, 'Hang on. I just shot someone'. I had a brew and that. I didn't get to sleep that night. I just lay there all night thinking, 'I shot someone'. It's something strange. A really strange feeling. You feel like, you know, a bit happy with yourself – I've done me job, it's what I've come here for, know what I mean? He's Taliban and I've got one of them. You feel quite chuffed about it. Then you're feeling, like, you know, well you know, sad. You're thinking ... well, you know ... you know, the, the geezer's another human being at the end of the day, like.

When the First World War began in August 1914, it was said by all that it would be over by Christmas. It was not. Instead hundreds of thousands of men spent that first of four winters in trenches and mud. But on Christmas Day, unlike so many days before, it did not rain. Instead there was a heavy frost; it made barbed wire and helmets glitter. And from the British, French and German trenches carols were heard. And then, as one British Captain reported in a letter home: ‘The enemy...shouted across to our fellows and then popping their heads out of their trenches got out of them altogether.’ And so began one of the most extraordinary gatherings in history: along the front line, in no man’s land, soldiers who had spent months trying to kill each other, now exchanged greetings of ‘Merry Christmas,’ ‘Bonne Noel’ and ‘Fröhliche Weihnachten,’ while sharing chocolate and cigarettes.

Jesus Christ was a man of peace. He reconciled enemies, even by bringing them together to connive at his death. But Jesus Christ is even more: He is Peace itself. He forgave our sins for

only with forgiveness can there be peace. And so the angels sang at his birth: 'Peace to people of good will.' And only the celebration of his birth was able to make soldiers merry, remember each other's humanity and once more populate no man's land on a frosty Christmas Day. And so I have changed my mind about the lights of Oxford street: how perfect that they should illumine the darkness of this day. We should wear the poppy with Christmas hope.