

REMEMBRANCE DAY SERMON

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 13 2022



AT

**THE QUEEN'S COLLEGE
OXFORD**

CHORAL EVENSONG 6PM

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for ones friends. Do these famous words from the traditional reading for Remembrance Sunday have much relevance to a rising generation who are too young to have had any direct experience of war?

Or to put the question another way as implied by the verse from St John's Gospel.

Can you imagine circumstances in which any of you would be prepared to lay down your lives for your friends?

This is not the kind of question that often gets asked but it was on the agenda of this university rather dramatically 89 years ago when in 1933 at a time when Hitler was threatening to destroy the peace of Europe the Oxford Union asked its largely undergraduate and entirely male membership to debate and vote on the motion: "This house would not fight for King and Country"

To the astonishment if not the outrage of the nation, this motion was carried at the Oxford Union by 275 to 153 votes.

There were some extraordinary reactions to the vote: "Disloyalty at Oxford with gesture towards the Reds" was the headline in the shocked *Daily Telegraph*.

At the other end of the opinion spectrum, Adolf Hitler, who was foolish enough to take the Oxford Union seriously, was delighted.

He apparently believed that this debate proved the lack of willpower of young Englishmen to fight against him and his evil plans of European conquest and Jewish persecution.

Historians say it was one of the factors in encouraging him in 1939 to launch the Second World War.

Ironically almost all the young students who in 1933 had spoken or voted for the resolution, "this house would not fight for King and Country", did, when war was declared in 1939, enlist in the armed services of the Crown. They did fight for King and Country often with great courage and gallantry.

Two of those who had been speakers for the motion laid down their lives for the friends and were killed in action during World War II.

Now perhaps we should not read too much into that notorious King and Country debate.

As a former Librarian and Treasurer of the Oxford Union myself in the 1960s I know that its debates are often the last refuge of unreality.

Yet in today's fragile and uncertain world those wars which in Neville Chamberlain's phrase are "in far away countries of which we know nothing" can come to haunt us back at home. Vietnam, the Gulf Wars, and now the war in Ukraine are examples in living memory.

If we had been citizens in any of the countries participating in these conflicts would we have willingly fought when called to the colours?

Earlier this week I was visiting Kazakhstan, a huge Eurasian country whose border with Russia is longer than Canada's border with the United States.

I was astonished to learn that getting on for 1 million young Russians have fled to Kazakhstan in recent weeks in order to avoid President Putin's general "mobilisation" or national call up.

This exodus of young Russians to Kazakhstan and other countries around Russia could be seen as the equivalent of the draft dodgers who travelled out of the United States in the 1960s in order to avoid the compulsory conscription or Draft for America's Vietnam war in the 1960s.

At the time the draft dodgers were savagely criticised and indeed punished for their cowardice. But maybe we should think again about that reaction.

I was a war correspondent in Vietnam and I saw clearer than most people the moral as well as the military futility of that conflict. At first I admired the courageous Americans who laid down their lives in Vietnam – no less than 40,000 of them but sadly they were not making the supreme sacrifice for their friends, for their families or for their country. They were dying, unbelievable though it sounds, for something called "the domino theory"

The misplaced notion suggested that all South East Asia – Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and so on would fall under Communist domination if the South Vietnamese supported by America lost to the Communist North Vietnamese.

This was a morally and politically flawed forecast and I think about it sorrowfully every time I visit the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC.

My early Vietnam experiences were among the very first indicators that North Vietnamese willpower might prove stronger than US firepower. This was a great heresy at the time but it became a great truth.

And it is becoming a great truth again today in Ukraine where Russian firepower is conspicuously failing to defeat Ukrainian willpower.

This week's recapture of Kherson by the Ukrainians may suggest this is happening before our eyes.

From these examples let us come back to St. John's Gospel and that challenging verse.

"Greater love has no man than this than he lay down his life for his friends"

Morally, spiritually and theologically there is a concept inspired by Augustine of Hippo called "The Just War".

Do go and read study it as I had to do when reading Theology at Wycliffe Hall over 20 years ago. I recommend Canon Professor Nigel Biggar's magisterial new book published by OUP "*In Defence of War*"

But without reading any learned tomes, you will get the point why World War II was a just war and why the Vietnam war and why Putin's war against Ukraine were unjust wars.

In my lifetime – and I am now over 80 years old – it has been easy to see, with the wisdom of hindsight, which have been the just wars and which have been the unjust wars.

World War II – seen from the Allied side against Hitler and Nazi Germany was unarguably a Just War

My earliest childhood memory of that conflict came when V1 flying bombs known as Doodlebugs rained terror down upon London in 1945.

I vividly remember how a neighbour's house in the next door street to our own home in Putney was destroyed by a Doodlebug. The bomb's direct hit killed the entire family who lived there, and shattered the nerves of the surrounding neighbourhood.

I was so frightened by it that I created a family joke when I was toddler, for before I learned to say the words Mumma or Dada, I could say the word "Doo-bug".

If toddlers could have fought for King and Country, I think I would have been off to the recruiting office the day after that Doodlebug attack.

But the moral and military problems for you, the rising generation, in future wars will be different and much more difficult.

Because Ukraine may be just about the last old-fashioned war in which tanks, shells and artillery fire terrorise the civilian population.

The wars of the future are likely to be cyber wars, biological warfare, wars about contaminating or preventing water supplies, wars produced by fake intelligence reports or wars created by attacks from unidentified aggressors possibly using platforms in space.

These futuristic wars may sound unlikely but I assure you, having once been a Defence Minister here that such scenarios are constantly under review by expert military planners.

So will you be prepared to fight for your families, your friends, your King and your Country against a background of such future war scenarios. Unlike most preachers I do not have an answer to these hypothetical questions. But I leave you tonight with two thoughts

First on Remembrance Sunday or indeed on Veterans Day or Anzac Day or other such memorial days in other countries, never forget to honour those who responded to the call to lay down their lives for their friends. They did in their time what was brave, right, honourable and patriotic. So today we cherish their high example.

And secondly, know this: that the reasons for any just war and for all future moral or military struggles for peace may be found in Jesus' teachings such as in the passage from St John's Gospel which we have read today. Jesus loved peace but in the face of evil he was a realist rather than a pacifist.

It is a thought on which to ponder and pray this Remembrance Sunday.

Amen