

## **CIVIC MASS HOMILY 25 NOVEMBER 2018**

*I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth.*

Over the last two weeks, and in a variety of different ways at local and national level, our attention has been turned towards the events of a hundred years ago. Here and there you may have seen some of the evocative silhouette images of the British tommy with his poppy. These and the brilliantly remastered and coloured footage of the First World war have awakened our imagination afresh to the reality and pity of the bloody conflict that claimed so many lives.

Two weeks ago we kept a unique Remembrance Sunday as the Centenary of the Armistice fell on the Lord's Day. Wherever we were, we stood in silence, contemplating the impact of war on every generation including our own. We did so through the poignant recollection of a war now becoming as remote to us as many of its predecessors, yet still capable of exerting an influence, in part sorrowful and in part hopeful.

In 1918 the war-weary nations of Europe were adjusting with inexpressible relief to the end of the conflict that had raged for the previous four years. They were counting the cost in terms of human lives lost, shattered or irreparably damaged. In every village and city church they were setting up war-memorials like no other – a lasting testament to the young people who would never return to their families and friends.

Here in St Chad's we have our own War Memorial with its cabinet enclosing some two hundred names. Later during today's Mass, beside the War Memorial, we shall once again honour the memory of all those who gave their lives for their country. We shall pray in gratitude for the freedoms which their sacrifice guaranteed for us as well as for the repose of their souls and for their eternal freedom in the Kingdom of God.

This year's Civic Mass on the Feast of Christ the King is our Cathedral's principal commemoration of the centenary of the First World War. We are grateful that we can observe this special anniversary in the presence of our civic leaders, the judiciary and those who serve us with dedication in public life.

Reflecting on the horrors of war, it is the many stories of courage and human kindness that stand out as remarkable and hope-filled. We are inspired when we see the selflessness and goodness of so many, service personnel and civilians alike, in the face of great danger and personal hardship. Many of these unwritten stories have been handed down within our families and they continue to be an important element of our sense of identity as individuals, as families and communities and as a nation.

Like many of you, I grew up aware of the impact that the First World War had had on my family, both at home and in the conflict itself. I am moved when I reflect on the experience of my grandfather, John Joseph Longley, though in common with most of his generation he spoke very little about his experiences in the years that followed. He served with the Fourth Field Ambulance of the Royal Army Medical Corp, with the Second Division until August 1915 and with the Guards Division until they returned from Cologne in 1919.

Many families across our city have similar memories – memories that secure the ties between our different ethnic, cultural and faith communities. Prayers for peace have been offered in their hundreds of thousands in our different faith traditions. We sometimes forget that in the last census seventy-five percent of Birmingham's citizens self-identified as members of its different religions, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish and Christian. That represents a great deal of prayer for the good of our city.

And prayer leads to engagement with one another in the service of others – it leads to understanding and forgiveness, the foundations of peace. Jesus Christ resisted evil and wrong-doing with the weapons of loving-mercy and forgiveness. Celebrating the Feast of Christ the King we recognise that the laws of his kingdom are founded on some very challenging precepts.

These were the principles that shaped the life of Jesus Christ and they were written into the character of the man we see in St John's Gospel today, standing before the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. Our Lord acknowledges that he is a king, but with a power that is very different from Pilate's or Caesar's. *Mine is not a kingdom of this world. I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth.*

In St Luke's Gospel Jesus expresses this truth. It has become a golden rule for us:

*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly. To the man who slaps you on one cheek, present the other cheek too; to the man who takes your cloak from you, do not refuse your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and do not ask for your property back from the man who robs you. Treat others as you would like them to treat you.*

In this centenary year we pray for peace-makers and peace-keepers and we remember especially the members of our armed forces, services personnel and their families. In this Civic Mass we ask God's blessing upon all who serve this city in public office, upon all its faith communities and all its citizens as we strive to work together and to bear witness to the truth.