



## **All Saints Marseille**

### **Sermon**

**10<sup>th</sup> November 2019**

**Year C: 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday before Advent - Remembrance Sunday**

**Job 19.23-27a; 2 Thessalonians 2.1-5, 13-end; Luke 20.27-38**

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

During the First World War there was an army chaplain called Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy, who had a remarkable gift for connecting with soldiers in the trenches. A feature of his pastoral approach was to have a constant supply of cigarettes to offer them, as a result of which he acquired the nickname Woodbine Willie. It was an intense and bruising physical and mental experience for the chaplain as well as those in his care, and he didn't survive very many years after the War ended. But his legacy is remembered.

There's a story about Studdert-Kennedy following a group of soldiers out into no-man's land in the middle of the night, when they had gone in search of a wounded comrade to bring him back behind the lines. The expedition involved courage, fear, and the high risk of an attack in which both the wounded man and those seeking to bring him to safety would lose their lives. One of the group suddenly realised they were being followed and shouted: 'Who's there?' Studdert-Kennedy replied: 'the Church'. 'What on earth's it doing here?' 'Its job!'



On Monday, for the first time I visited the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery at Mazargues. I wanted to familiarise myself with it before the annual act of remembrance taking place there later this month, in which like my predecessors I have been invited to take part. I had also had an invitation from Iain, the gardener who looks after the cemetery, to come and meet him if I was passing by.

Some of you will know the cemetery well, but for those who don't I would encourage you to visit it. Stepping into it from the gravelled avenues of the French cemetery next door, I was greeted by the unexpected sight of a lush green lawn. There's a silence about it, not least because footsteps are inaudible. There are trees, newly planted last year to mark the centenary of the Armistice. There are waterfalls and flowering shrubs. You could be in an English garden, the sort you would pay to go and visit.

I met Iain, who told me that there are one thousand seven hundred and fifty-four people commemorated there from two World Wars. When the Commonwealth War Graves Commission was set up, part of its mandate was to commemorate all war dead individually and equally. They are therefore commemorated 'uniformly and equally, irrespective of military or civil rank, race or creed'. There are a large number of nations represented at Mazargues from across the world – India, China, the Caribbean, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa as well as the countries that make up the United Kingdom. Most were in their twenties and thirties when they died, though some were older, and some were younger.

There is deep sadness behind the stories. Some lost their lives in acts of war, some in accidents, some in arguments. All the mess and chaos of human living. We heard in our Old Testament reading this morning how Job, faced with unimaginable suffering, begs for a record to be kept of it: 'O that my words were



written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock for ever!’

The stones in the cemetery have been carved and tended with devotion. The inscriptions are in the different languages and scripts appropriate to each individual commemorated. Some, as so often in war, contain the remains of those found with no identification, so that their name is not known: ‘A soldier of the Second World War. Known Unto God.’

The cemetery at Mazargues contains, as all Commonwealth War Cemeteries do, the Cross of Sacrifice designed by Blomfield and the Stone of Remembrance designed by Lutyens. The inscription on the Stone of Remembrance, from the Book of Ecclesiasticus, is ‘Their name liveth for evermore’. In this respect, you could say, the cry of Job has been heard – ‘with an iron pen and with lead, engraved upon a rock’. While Iain and I were speaking, a lone magpie landed on the grass and stood still for several minutes. One for sorrow.

Yet through the love and devotion of those who have cared for it, in the peace and the dignity of the place, the determination to bring beauty where there was so much mess and pain, I came away with a sense that (in the words of the Book of Wisdom) their souls are in the hand of God, and there no torment shall touch them. As Jesus says in our Gospel reading today, they are ‘children of the resurrection. ... he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.’

If a family member comes to visit the cemetery in search of a distant relative or friend, it is the gardener who greets them and guides them, answering their questions, helping them find what they are looking for. Iain told me how he has explored the stories behind many of the individual graves, getting to know the



names of those who are buried there. There's something important about being known by name. In chapter 43 of the Book of Isaiah we read:

‘... thus says the Lord,  
he who created you...

‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.

<sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
... [B]ecause you are precious in my sight,  
and honoured, and I love you...’

For ours is a God who knows us by name. Christ was aware of the importance of the names of the people he spent time with. At the beginning of his ministry we hear: ‘Simon ... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church’, which works so much better in French: ‘Tu es Pierre, et sur cette pierre je bâtirai mon église.’ And at the end, after the resurrection, Mary Magdalene goes to the garden where Jesus is buried, where she meets him without realising who he is - as it says in the Fourth Gospel, ‘thinking him to be the gardener’. Until he calls her by name - ‘Mary’ - at which point she recognises him, and becomes the first person to announce to the disciples the news of the resurrection, the defeat of death by love.

On one of the stones in the cemetery at Mazargues the following words are carved: ‘Love’s Last Gift. Remembrance.’ If you think about it, the word ‘remember’ carries more than one meaning. As well as the important process of not forgetting, it also means to ‘re-member’, the opposite of ‘dismember’.



Michael Mayne, in his book *Pray, Love, Remember*, wrote this about that other meaning of ‘remember’:

“To re-member someone is to do what all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t do to Humpty Dumpty: put him together again. It is to do what only God can do.” To be re-created, put together again, but in God’s likeness, as He had always intended us to be. “For to be re-membered is our destiny. In the end that is our end, our purpose: that is why we are here.” Like the penitent thief who says: “Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom”, our prayer is: “Lord, re-member me, refashion me, so that I may share the life of your Kingdom. Remake my life in the shape of your own.”

And his answer? “If you would truly remember me, if you would bring me out of the past into your present, then do this with bread and wine.” And in our imagination we watch him as he takes bread in his hands and offers it, thanks God for it, breaks it, shares it. Says (by implication): “This is me. This is the pattern of my life. You are now to re-member me, that is to say, to be my body in the world, your lives offered to God, your lives lived thankfully, your lives broken and shared in the costly service of others.” ... We are presenting, in these four acts of taking, thanking, breaking and sharing, the proper pattern and shape for all human life. ”

That is why we are here. It is, in the deepest sense, the church ‘doing its job’.

I came away from the cemetery with a sense that holding the memory of those who lie there is part of our responsibility now. Iain has kindly lent us a wreath from the cemetery’s store, as they are rarely used there now. We have placed it



before the altar here this morning. There is no one now based in Marseille from the English-speaking bodies who used to organise the annual act of remembrance at Mazargues. But on 28<sup>th</sup> November the church, in the shape of this chaplaincy, will be there, and if anyone asks you what on earth it is doing, you can tell them: ‘Its job.’

Amen.