

## **From Bannockburn to Afghanistan**

Sermon: 10.55am 14<sup>th</sup> November 2021  
Remembrance Sunday: St James Church Alderholt  
Readings: See service sheet

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

At 11.00 O'clock in the morning on Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> November, our nation joined many others around the world in falling silent for the Act of Remembrance – and today we have repeated that action here.

Today stirs in us a complicated mix of feelings about the incalculable cost of warfare – both human and material. Yet, throughout the history of mankind, there has always been warfare.

It's a very startling fact, that before the battle of Bannockburn in the 14<sup>th</sup> century – to Afghanistan in the 21<sup>st</sup>, a span of more than 700 years, our country seems to have always been engaged in some form of conflict or warfare – at home or around the world.

I started this time-period from Bannockburn because some years ago, my wife Linda and I visited the site of the battle. We took a holiday in Scotland and visited Sterling Castle, where we joined a group of mostly American tourists for a guided tour, the guide being a very patriotic Scots-woman.

Before the start of her talk, she asked "Are there any English among you". When I piped up "Yes – we are" the group laughed, but she didn't – so I added, "Don't worry – just tell the story as it was" and she did – from her perspective!

She talked mostly about the Battle of Bannockburn that took place in the fields south of the castle. She told us how the Scots and English fought each other for centuries; then she gave a very detailed account of how in 1314 the loyal Scots, under the leadership of King Robert the Bruce, gave the English army a trashing at Bannockburn and sent them running for home.

She then briefly touched on how the brutal English army did eventually suppress the brave Scots warriors in the last battle of the Jacobite rebellion at Culloden, south of Inverness, in 1746 – some 432 years later!

Linda and I couldn't visit Culloden at that time, but a few years later we were back in Scotland and visited the battlefield. The most solemn and moving monument there is the exterior grey granite wall of the visitors' centre.

Along the wall there are stones that jut out from the flat surface, each one representing a soldier who died in the battle.

One end of the wall represents those who died in the service of the army; there are several dozen stones.

Then, after a break of smooth wall, the jutting stones representing the Jacobite rebels begin – and they go on – and on – and on.

No one knows the full extent of the Scots casualties, but it's estimated that about a thousand died in that one-hour battle; in desperate hand-to-hand combat with soldiers who were far better trained, armed and nourished.

So, what did more than 400 years of battles between the Scots and English achieve? I can't answer that question here, but that battle at Culloden certainly changed the history of England and Scotland forever.

One notable result to come out of the whole disastrous experience was that British people have never since then faced each other in open warfare. This is just one example of how something beneficial can come from the evil of warfare – and let's be clear, warfare is always evil – but sometimes, when it can't be avoided, we have to take the path of least evil.

I find it easy to draw connections with the Culloden story, even though the event took place 275 years ago.

First, and most importantly, there is grief for the countless number of lives lost in war. But, quite rightly, there is also the pride and gratitude of those who remember family and friends maimed or lost in warfare throughout history.

Today we must also acknowledge the ambivalent feelings that arise from the more recent conflicts and wars – in Northern Ireland, the Falklands, the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan – the list goes on. In each of these conflicts young men and

women have been asked to risk their lives for reasons that are at the very least – debatable.

Many thousands of civilians have died in these and other conflicts too, and we must be mindful of the shame and horror of those deaths alongside the memory of the brave men and women who have sacrificed their lives at their nation's bidding.

The world religions have some strong principles and guidelines about warfare. It's often claimed that religion has been the cause of most wars throughout history; but I put it to you that it's actually the abuse of religion that has brought about wars.

However, where non-believers might look back at the horrors of warfare and despair, particularly since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christians do not despair. The image we look to is Jesus Christ, hanging from the executioner's cross – but conquering death through the resurrection.

If God was in Christ, as all Christians believe, then there is hope in every situation, even, and supremely, in apparent defeat and death.

It was in absorbing the hatred and pain of the world and refusing to respond with violence that Jesus broke the cycle of evil; and he calls his followers to take up the same cross of suffering and forgiveness.

This is not saying that Christians should reject warfare at all cost – that they should always 'turn the other cheek'.

I said earlier that all warfare is evil, but I firmly believe that sometimes we must take the least evil path in order to counter forces such as Nazism and Islamic State.

For many years our forces, and those from other nations, supported Afghanistan in the fight against the Taliban.

A few years ago, we witnessed through the media the last of our combat troops handing over control to Afghan forces and pulling out of the area. But a few months ago, we saw the Taliban rapidly sweep through the country, imposing on the people their concept of Sharia Law; suppressing hope for the future of that fragile place that was starting to show such promise. The younger generations in particular have

tasted freedom and want more! Time will tell where that country's future lies – we can only hope and pray for the people of Afghanistan.

And just a few years after pulling our troops out of Iraq we were back there fighting in support of the legitimate Iraqi government to overthrow another evil ideology that was threatening the world, the Fundamentalist Islamic State.

76 years have elapsed since the defeat of the Nazis, and many more conflicts have taken place since.

- In 1969 the smoldering situation in Northern Ireland erupted into civil violence, with British troops deployed to assist the police in establishing and maintaining law and order.
- The end of World War 2 ushered in a new era of European cooperation, but in the 1990's the Yugoslav Federation broke up in bloodshed and ethnic cleansing.
- The Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussain, was toppled from power, but Iraq is still in a state of conflict.
- Islamic State has been suppressed – but not eliminated. The remnants are constantly attempting to regroup and rise again.
- Culloden marked the end of open warfare in Britain, but today we see in Scotland a powerful and passionate movement that is attempting to gain independence from the UK.

The learning process is painfully slow, with history constantly repeating itself – and has anything been gained?

Well:

- The people in Ireland, north and south of the border now live in peace.
- The Taliban have given assurances that there will be greater freedom and tolerance for Afghan people – only time will tell if this comes about,
- The new nations that emerged from the Yugoslav Federation also now live in peace.

- We now see greater international cooperation in challenging the evil force of Islamic State, particularly from the Arab nations where it mostly originated.
- Despite what some may claim, the move for Scottish Independence from the UK is being carried out entirely through the democratic process.

Christians believe it is only hope in God that offers us a bigger picture of the terrible waste of human life that we have managed to produce – generation after generation.

If we live without this hope, if there is no vision beyond the battlefield gravestones, then all we are left is despair.

Jesus Christ gave himself in sacrifice for the sins of the world. He told his disciples, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Today, we acknowledge this same self-sacrifice through the laying of wreaths and individual crosses before this war memorial. Our prayer today is that the time will come when there will be an end to the misery and pain of war forever, so that those who have laid down their lives will not have done so in vain. Amen.