

'City of the Dead (for Remembrance Service)

Remembrance Service at St.Luke's Toowoomba 10 November 2012 – The Revd Dr Jon Inkpin

When I was at Oxford university, I had the pleasure of meeting the former British Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. It was on the occasion of a special dinner at my college for those of us who held scholarships, or postmasterships, as they are curiously known at Merton College. Mr Macmillan was invited to be the guest speaker, and those of us who held postmasterships had a private meeting with him before the meal itself. My peers and I asked a number of questions and Mr. Macmillan, though quite well on in age, gave a series of fruitful answers. Then, towards the end of the meeting, one of us asked a question about Harold Macmillan's own involvement at Oxford university. You studied here for a while before the first world war, one of us said to him, 'I have always wondered why you didn't come back and complete your degree.' There was a long, and significant, pause. Then, very quietly, and with some emotional effort, Mr Macmillan simply murmured, hardly audibly, 'city of the dead'.

I have always remembered that encounter, and, especially, that one moment. For it was profound insight into the depths of the horror and tragedy we remember today. Remember: Harold Macmillan was an exceedingly successful and hugely experienced man. He was British Prime Minister in the late 1950s and early 1960s, at a time when Britain was still one of the major world powers. He had seen things and handled questions far more obviously weighty and imposing. Yet this simple, kindly and ingenuous, inquiry brought him close to emotional collapse, over sixty years after the events to which it referred. For this takes us to the heart, not only of Harold Macmillan, but of all sensitive people who have lived through the trauma and devastation of war.

'City of the dead': do some of us here perhaps have similar feelings about places or times with which we ourselves are associated? Do we recognise the deep, telling and continuing pain which comes to all who experience the loss of so many friends, comrades, loved ones and fellow human beings in the context of war? Does the sacrifice of so many lives still have the power to re-open the wounds we still bear, personally, as communities together, and as a nation and world? This is at the heart of our commemoration today.

'City of the dead': in my last year at Oxford, I had two rooms at the top of our medieval college, with wonderful views down to the river over Oxford's iconic Christ Church meadows. It was a fascinating place in which to live, walking literally through the stories and stones of history: with success and failure, dreams and achievements, progress and pain all rolled up together at every turn. The most poignant steps of all however, were taken when I walked, sometimes several times a day, under the archway of Fellows Quad, where, in a room above, Queen Henrietta Maria had once been hospitably imprisoned by Cromwell's soldiers. For on archway wall was a huge list inscribed upon the stonework: with name after name of a young man of a similar age as I at that time. Well over a hundred names in all: a number equivalent to the entire male population of many villages of the time and staggering for the size of Merton College. For these were the names of Merton's fallen from the first world war who were, almost all, junior officers in the British army. As such, they were the very first to lead the charges from the terrible trenches, and, as a result, the first to be mown down by the inexorable response of enemy guns. Yes, Oxford was indeed a 'city of the dead' by 1918, Even now, to view that stoney list, and so many like it across the world, is to expose the fragile foundations of our battered hearts and common histories. We live, out of the reminders of their death. 'City of the dead': those were the only words that even a former British Prime Minister could hardly find for such an occasion as this.

For silence is the first and most important response we can make on this day, as we remember the fallen and the horrors of war. It is the natural and right response, so far from our modern media's constant intrusion into these deep and painful things which matter beyond mere words. Harold Macmillan's generation knew this. They knew that some things can only be borne with, rather than broadcast. Such a lack of garrulousness may seem strange to our talkative age. Yet, good though Facebook and Twitter may be for some things, what we do today is of another level and dimension of communication and profound connection. Silence then is the core of our gathering today, and then, secondly, sombreness: again, another word which sits oddly for some in our contemporary world. Without this however we have no soul or depth. For only solemnity can confer true dignity upon death and the tragic sacrifices of war. I think, for example, of the somber dignity of national memorials and commemorations in Canberra for the fallen. I recall too, from years past, further afield, the deeply moving acts on the Mall in London: with a somberness assisted by the grimness of the European November and advancing winter: such a natural symbol, indeed, of the bleakness of the world of the first Armistice Day November in 1918. Does that seem a little different in dignity perhaps from some styles of Anzac commemoration in recent years, and the undoubted incongruity of the mixing, for example, of Anzac ritual and more trivial pursuits such as football? Surely sombre solemnity, as well as silence, must be part of our remembrance of all those, civilian and military, who died in the past, and of all those still caught up today in devastating conflicts?

For then, alongside silence and sombreness, a third 's' word is core to today: the word 'solidarity'. To gather here as we do, is to express our solidarity with what has happened in the past: with the loss of loves, limbs, and life itself. It is to embody our solidarity with one another and the wounds and wonders of our own hurts and histories. And it is to envisage a fresh solidarity with all those who continue to suffer today: a recommitment, in so far as we can manage things, to learn the lessons of war and find new ways to lasting peace. How will we do this, in a city, and nation, mercifully free of war and persecution within its own bounds? Well, perhaps Harold Macmillan also gives us a clue. For one of his most famous phrases was in relation to the growing prosperity in his post-war era as a Conservative Prime Minister. We've 'never had it so good', he would say, reminding us of the peace and wealth we can so easily take for granted. Isn't that true of Australia today? Surely, despite our political squabbles and genuine issues, we have never had it so good here. So how are to use this peace and prosperity? Harold Macmillan's own example shows us that we must work creatively to honour the sacrifices of the past, and the tragedies of the fallen. We do this by seeking dignity for the living and establishing new paths of peace. For Harold Macmillan this meant hastening the process of giving freedom to subject peoples of the British Empire, building on social welfare measures at home and overseas, and reshaping defence priorities to meet contemporary needs, not least the achievement of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

This morning, may we then give thanks for what we now have. And may we, in gratitude work generously with others in our world for justice and peace. For, with our own deep silence today and our respectful sombreness and dignity, this is the best memorial we can offer to the fallen.

May the souls of the dead thus truly rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.