

308 Faces in the Sand

We are all aware that the United Kingdom is in very turbulent times at present due to the attempts to leave the European Union in a fair and orderly manner. Our prayers for our leaders, and for God's sovereign mercy over our nation in these difficult days, are needed more than ever (egs., II Chronicles 7.14 / Mark 12.17 / I Timothy 2.1-6 / I Peter 2.17).

Yet in the midst of the Brexit turmoil we have just experienced another very different side of our nation's self-identity. Last Sunday, 11th November 2018, was the 100th anniversary to the day of the signing of the Armistice that brought the fighting to an end in the Great War. This anniversary was marked with great dignity in many places and in many ways, as the horrors of that terrible war were solemnly remembered.

We think of the moat at the Tower of London; of the Act of Remembrance at the Cenotaph, with the German President laying a wreath beside that of the Queen, followed by the formal veterans' procession and then for the first time by "a people's procession" 10,000 strong; of the service at Westminster Abbey, with the Queen and the German President again each laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; and perhaps as poignant as anything else, those great pictures of the faces of some of the people killed in the War etched on the sand of many beaches around our country, faces which in time were gradually washed away by the incoming tide.

For whatever reasons, we as a people in these islands seem to have a particular sensitivity when it comes to commemorating great events in the life-story of our nation. The poppy, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the Cenotaph, the meticulously-kept war cemeteries in Europe and elsewhere in the world – each in its way is simple and understated, yet somehow "right". Each manages to express, be it with few words or no words, the depth and multitude of our feelings as we contemplate terrible events in times past, the consequences of which remain with us today.

Through all these acts of remembrance runs that uneasy relationship between suffering, sacrifice, misery and death on the one hand, for those directly involved and for their loved ones back home, and on the other hand, the Christian Faith itself. So often among veterans and their families there is a barely-concealed reluctance to "allow God into all this", to allow the Padre or local Vicar somehow to take everything over with a few nice words and prayers about the God who loves us and cares for us. The rest of us can surely understand this reluctance, after the experiences that many veterans have gone through, including what they may regard as mere pious-sounding waffle that they have had to listen to over the years at their church parades or the gravesides of their fallen comrades. Truly, how very, very sensitive must be any Minister of the Gospel when trying to bring genuine meaning and comfort, and often it is rugged, practical Christian love in the midst of the utterly appalling which speaks at the time louder than any words.

But the simple facts remain. We really are all in the hands of the God who created us and loves us. We really are sinful, fallen human beings, capable of vile behaviour towards one another, and incapable when left to ourselves of getting out of this sin-wrought mess. So Almighty God really has given us Himself in His Son Jesus Christ,

who endured the most appalling suffering out of loving duty to His Father, a self-sacrifice of total love in laying down His life for His friends (John 15.13). As a result, the way back into the pre-Fall fellowship with God which Adam and Eve knew really is now wide open for any who will simply accept the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ for themselves (egs., Hebrews 2.9-10 & 10.19-22 & 12.1-2 / I Peter 1.3-5).

It is this Christian Gospel alone, and no other, which explains the origin of the horrors – human sin - and which, in Christ Himself, provides the Way, the Truth and the Life both through the horrors and out from them. Without these amazing Gospel mercies, the horrors of war, as well as any horrors on a lesser scale in our ordinary lives, remain just what they are – seemingly senseless, incomprehensible, and life-dominating; but with the Gospel mercies, in the midst of the anguish and tears are to be found meaning and hope, life and victory (eg., Isaiah 53.1-7 ... / John 6.37-40 / I Corinthians 15.20-22, 25-26, 55-58).

In closing this time, we might imagine the face of Jesus Himself etched on the sand. It too was washed away in death, but when the tide receded again – it was still there.

And it still is.

Praise God, every poppy, every headstone and every tear that is shed finds its meaning and its home in the simple fact that Christ is risen, He is risen indeed.

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