

# **The Bishop of St Albans' Presidential Address**

## **Diocesan Synod - March 2018**

### **Commemorating the Armistice**

This autumn will be dominated by television programmes, newspaper articles and exhibitions marking the centenary of the end of the First World War. Estimates vary, but it is thought that during the war as many as 18 million soldiers and civilians were killed worldwide. Here in Britain around 1 million people were killed in the conflict and another 1.67 million people were injured. Behind these horrendous statistics lie the tragic stories of individual soldiers who never returned to these shores and whose bodies still lie in foreign soil.

If you visit the St Symphorien military cemetery near Mons in Belgium, you will find two adjacent tombstones, marking the graves of the first and the last soldiers to be killed in the First World War.

Seventeen year old Private John Parr was a local man, born in Barnet and brought up in North Finchley. After leaving school he worked as a golf caddy before enlisting in the Middlesex Regiment, despite the fact that he was only 14 years old. He became a reconnaissance cyclist and whilst out on patrol was killed seventeen days after the start of the war. It was thought he was shot by a German cavalry patrol.

Private George Ellison, a married Yorkshire miner, who fought with the Royal Irish Lancers, had survived the battles of Mons, Ypres, Armentieres, Loos, Bassée, Lens and Cambrai. It is tragic that, as the war drew to a close, he was killed just ninety minutes before the Armistice whilst on patrol near Mons.

We have no records to tell us how these two men's families coped with their deaths. Sadly, their stories could be replicated thousands of times. Hardly a community or a family in Britain was unaffected by death and suffering.

As we approach the centenary of the Armistice, the pressing question facing us is: how should we commemorate the end of the war? Karen Bradley, the Culture Minister, has suggested that the centenary should be marked by the ringing of church bells, just as they rang out at the Armistice. Well, as a bell ringer, I am always keen to hear bells being rung, so I support this idea and hope bells in all our churches will be rung. Yet we surely need a response which is more ambitious and more fitting to honour the memory of those who died and suffered.

So, as well as looking back in remembrance, I would suggest if we are really serious about the commemoration, we need to recommit ourselves to the serious business of working for peace and justice with renewed vigour. Jesus said "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God", a phrase which suggests that peace is not just an absence of war or conflict, but is an activity which requires our attention and our energy.

Peacemaking begins with us. We need to make peace in our own hearts, where it is all too easy to harbour resentment and jealousy. It was significant that, following the Brexit vote, there was a surge in hate crimes across our nation, some of it rooted in xenophobia. If such feelings are not challenged and channelled, they can become the soil in which the seeds of conflict can flourish.

We can also make peace by working for a world in which justice and equality prevail. Many of the trouble spots of the world are places where ancient grievances and injustices have lain dormant for decades like unexploded bombs (think of Bosnia or Rwanda), only to be detonated when a spark sets off a chain reaction of tit for tat revenge.

Perhaps the most important area that today's peacemakers need to attend to is the reduction, or even the prohibition, of nuclear weapons. I was moved recently reading an interview with Dr Masao Tomonaga who survived the second atomic bomb in Nagasaki on 9 August 1945. He trained as a doctor at Nagasaki University Medical School. He described the effect of the bomb:

*At the time of the bombing, I was two years and two months old. That morning, I was sleeping on the second floor of our Japanese-style wooden house in a Japanese-style bed, when suddenly the blast from the atomic bomb crushed our house. Fortunately I was not harmed, maybe because I was protected by the bed itself and the ceiling of the house did not hit me directly. After the blast, my mother, who had been preparing food, searched for me in the rubble of what had been my bedroom, and found I was still sleeping in the bed. She got me out of the ruins of our house, which burned to the ground ten to fifteen minutes after the initial blast. These are the dual physical effects of an atomic bomb: first the blast and then the fire.*

*Harsh medical consequences such as severe burns and fractures and other bodily injuries, for example due to broken glass, were typical effects of the atomic bomb blast. Some people were struck by so many shards of broken glass that some of the glass had to be left inside their bodies.*

*People near the blast itself suffered burns. People who were much further away from the hypocentre at the time of the blast suffered other injuries ... One officer [a member of a British Navy research team] wrote that that each victim was killed three times: once by the blast, once by the heat, and once by the radiation. If an individual was closer to ground zero, her whole body became charcoal. Those terribly burned victims received a lethal dose of radioactivity as well as heat radiation, and also fractures.*

The interviewer asked "What are some important findings on the health consequences of the atomic bomb?" Dr Tomonaga answered:

*Research shows that 'short-distance survivors' – those who were located within 1.5 km of the hypocentre of the blast – have an average rate of leukaemia about fifty times higher than the average rate of leukaemia occurrences ... The initial leukaemia peak disappeared after about fifteen years, but to my surprise a second leukaemia peak is now appearing, this time among the survivors who were children younger than ten years old at the time of the bombing.*

*Nagasaki University doctors performed extensive psychological research in 1995, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombing. We found that about 7,000 survivors showed a very high incidence of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder after fifty years, a very large-scale psychological consequence. They suffered from flashbacks to the memory of the bombing, causing their mental health to deteriorate.*

The Church of England has had a long record of engaging with issues of nuclear arms. The Anglican Pacifist Fellowship has made nuclear arms a major part of its campaigning over several decades. In *The Church and the Bomb*, published in 1982, the General Synod debated a motion which urged the UK to work towards unilateral disarmament (although Synod declined to support the motion). In 1988 a working party published another report, *Peacemaking in a Nuclear Age*. In 2007 a report was produced for a General Synod debate by the Mission and Public Affairs Council called *The Future of Trident*.

All this activity makes it all the more odd that the Church of England's voice – unlike that of the Roman Catholic Church - has been strangely absent from the most recent international attempts to limit the use of nuclear weapons. Last July, 122 nations belonging to the United Nations voted for the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*, a legally binding international agreement to prohibit nuclear weapons. The support of at least fifty countries was required to bring the treaty into effect. By January 2018 it had been signed by 56 states.

The treaty prohibits the 'development, testing, production, stockpiling, stationing, transfer, use and threat of use of nuclear weapons, as well as assistance and encouragement to the prohibited activities'. For those states which have nuclear weapons the treaty specifies 'a time-bound framework for negotiations leading to the verified and irreversible elimination of its nuclear weapons programme'. However, having a nuclear capability, the British government has been unwilling to sign the treaty.

Meanwhile, many of us are concerned that in an unstable world, where nuclear weapons are proliferating, we need action. This was illustrated recently when, in response to Chairman Kim Jong-un, President Trump promised that if North Korea attacked the USA it would be "met with fire and fury like the world has never seen".

Then two weeks ago (1st March 2018) President Vladimir Putin gave a speech in which he claimed that Russia was developing an array of new nuclear weapons. It was a robust and bellicose speech, claiming that Russia would have the capability to fire missiles to almost anywhere in the world and that these weapons would even be able to evade the American missile shields.

The problem is that if, God forbid, any of these leaders were to authorise the use of nuclear weapons it is unlikely that they would suffer personally, as they would be sheltering in bunkers deep beneath the earth. The collateral damage would be to the millions of civilians who have nowhere to shelter – just as it was in the First World War and at Hiroshima. It is for this reason that I long for our country to work toward multilateral nuclear disarmament, even if the process takes us several years.

As a church we have not had an opportunity to debate this issue at a national level. We do not have a Church of England position on nuclear arms and, as you would expect, there will be a wide range of views represented in this synod here today. Nevertheless, I believe it is crucial that over the coming months we find time to debate this vitally important subject, both to inform ourselves of the facts and to help us think how we can contribute to the vital work of building peace.

So, to return to the centenary of the Armistice later this year, I hope that as well as giving thanks for the sacrifice of those who died in the war, we will reflect on the part that we can play as peacemakers in today's world – peace in our own lives, peace in our world and peace in the light of the threat of nuclear war.

+ Alan St Albans