Remembrance B 2018 – Hebrews 9: 24-end; Mark 1: 14-20

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

You will have been aware I am sure, this week, of the multiplicity of events surrounding and observing the centenary of the Armistice. You will have noticed – and if you haven’t, do please go and see – the display of poppy craft made by the children of Sunbeams, displayed in the memorial chapel. And it was my privilege on Friday to conduct the Brentwood schools’ Act of Remembrance at the memorial on Shenfield Road, which included the dedication of a stone for William Merrifield, born in Brentwood, who won the Victoria Cross for his actions in 1918, just a month before the Armistice.

And there have been stories told remembering all the dimensions of war; stories of nobility and sacrifice, but also of horror and tragedy. Picture if you can Stalingrad, during the Second World War: December 1942 – letters home, written by German soldiers, are still extant; letters which tell that they were surrounded and supplies were running out. One soldier wrote telling his mother that he and his fellow soldiers had been giving gifts to each other – to one, a last piece of writing paper, to another a last cigarette, and to another a bit of bread. He wrote: We have nothing and yet this has been the most memorable of all Christmases. There was a solidarity and generosity in that, that we can recognise as truly remarkable.

Yet those same soldiers were sending 7- and 8-year-old Russian children down to the Volga to collect water for them in their water bottles, in the full knowledge that the Russians were instructed to shoot anyone who did so. At one and the same time, we witness the nobility of the human spirit contrasted with a complete indifference, if not actual savagery, towards human life. And part of our remembrance this year and every year has to be that we recall all of these facets.

That is the paradox of war: that human beings can be at their best and most generous, most kind, as well as bravest, but also at our weakest, most vulnerable and most vicious. You see that paradox in stories all the time.

One of the things that has struck me has been the memorials in churches, schools and community centres: right across the country, this centenary has inspired people and fired their imaginations – we have seen a greater variety of poppy badges and brooches than ever before – knitted and crocheted, paper and enamel, even porcelain once or twice – and we have also seen different ways of marking the occasion - with poppy drops, with rigging cascading down church towers and the outsides of schools, covered in poppies and exhortations to remember. Memorials in the making of which people have worked unbelievably hard, demonstrating a commitment to tracing stories of local people, reconnecting with local history, telling stories of courage and generosity of spirit, of people looking out for both friend and stranger – and those are really powerful, deep qualities that begin to enable communities to flourish. It has completely captured people in a very deep sense.

So what is it that has touched people? Something, I think, about recognising those qualities – however horrific war is, and however brutal it forces people to be, somehow within it, there is one aspect that is good. ‘Profoundly good’ was a phrase I used last week, but it seems appropriate again this week. We see both in war stories and in the memorials people have come together to create, that people can be good for one another; selflessly good – extending even towards the enemy on occasions.

And there is something there about what we in the 21st century are desperately wanting to discover or reaffirm in ourselves in these deeply troubled times. How **do** we come together in a way that continues to affirm that which is good?

Part of our honouring of those who have fallen in war has to be a kind of serious vigilance about what has happened. There is this myth of progress in terms of humanity – Darwinian evolution, progress medical, scientific and technological. We might have thought that we had progressed morally – that this horrendous war could not and would not happen again – and yet it did. And so did others. And still it goes on.

Our human mastery of the world in which we live enables nobler goods to be realised, certainly, but also baser evils. And perhaps we seek those greater goods because we know we need to confront those baser evils.

If just once in the coming week we can each reject an instinct to that baseness, a reflex action that will hurt or wound someone - or just not be to their flourishing - then we will be going some way to honouring all the good that we have seen expressed in the past weeks and to making the world a better place.

In the infamous words that may be of Confucius: a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

**Amen**