

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 12, 2023

Remembrance Sunday

Choral Evensong with Act of Remembrance

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

Chaplain Captain Mark Winward, *USN Senior U.S. Navy Chaplain*

on

John 15:9-13

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Remembrance Day Evensong

I'm honored to have been asked to participate in your Remembrance Day Evensong. I currently serve as the National Security Agency Chaplain just outside of Washington and have had the privilege of serving as a Chaplain during the last 25 years of my 37 years of commissioned Naval service. Having performed countless military, memorial, and veterans services, I must confess this is one of the most meaningful because of the themes that echo commitment, hope, and peace

Remembrance Day in marks the signing of the Armistice that ended the fierce fighting of World War I at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918. That war claimed a toll of 10 million dead – 39 million total dead, wounded, or MIA. WWI was dominated by trench tactics in transition time to modern warfare. To make matters more miserable, while the science of killing had advanced, medicine still hadn't caught up to the 20th century. On 7 NOV 1919, King George V dedicated the 11th of November as a day to those lost in the Great War. Because red poppies bloomed in some of the worst battlefields of Flanders in WWI, they soon became symbolic of Remembrance Day.

And so, we gather here to honor those who have died in service to their countries no just as a memorial to their sacrifice, but as a reflection of what is good and true. On this side of heaven, we must acknowledge that as humans, our hearts may be blemished, our cause of mixed justice. And anyone who has experienced the horrors of war looks to the Day of the Lord when “[we] shall beat [our] swords into plowshares, and [our] spears into pruning hooks.” But, until that time, we must likewise acknowledge that the selfless commitment we demonstrate this side of heaven – that which is good, that which just, that which is selfless – remains steadfastly on the side of the angels.

The majestic poem by Sir Cecil Arthur Spring-Rice, often sung as a hymn on Remembrance Day, *I vow to thee my country*, captures this beautifully:

*I vow to thee, my country,
all earthly things above,
Entire and whole and perfect,
the service of my love;
The love that asks no question,
the love that stands the test,
That lays upon the altar
the dearest and the best;
The love that never falters,
the love that pays the price,*

*The love that makes undaunted
the final sacrifice.*

*I heard my country calling,
away across the sea,
Across the waste of waters
she calls and calls to me.
Her sword is girded at her side,
her helmet on her head,
And round her feet are lying
the dying and the dead.
I hear the noise of battle,
the thunder of her guns,
I haste to thee my mother,
a son among thy sons.*

*And there's another country,
I've heard of long ago,
Most dear to them that love her,
most great to them that know;
We may not count her armies,
we may not see her King;
Her fortress is a faithful heart,
her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently
her shining bounds increase,
And her ways are ways of gentleness,
and all her paths are peace.*

Love of country, love without falter, love that pays any price – resonates with tones of that heavenly country, our *true* home. What ennobles service members we gather here to remember – and those who have dedicated your lives in service to God and country – is selfless service which is the very essence of heaven.

Individuals join the military for a variety of reasons –many to serve their country or to experience the pride of accomplishment. But at 19 years old, when that young person finds themselves in combat, it usually isn't only patriotism which primarily prompts that ordinary person to perform extraordinary feats of bravery. Adversity has a way of building bonds stronger than death itself. Shakespeare's Henry V called it "this band of brothers." It's mainly for this "band of brothers," their buddies, that a service member willingly gives their life. Perhaps that's why one of the most quoted scriptures at military memorials are Jesus' words in today's gospel from John 15:13: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

The motion picture "Saving Private Ryan" poignantly portrayed this spirit of camaraderie amidst the horrible reality of war. The plot, revolving around an Army platoon's search for Private James Ryan whose three brothers were lost in battle in World War II, draws inspiration from real-life events. The begins with Private Ryan's recollection, years later, as he surveys the thousands of crosses above Normandy Beach in France. He flashes back to a platoon and their captain as they carry out a mission to find him somewhere in the chaos, amidst millions of troops in the middle of hostile territory.

As the eight men endure enemy action, including sniper fire, the soldiers wonder why all this sacrifice for one man. Following the death of two soldiers from the platoon, they eventually find Private Ryan alone with a couple of other men holding a small bridge against the inevitable onslaught of the German army. Finally, the vanguard of German troops attack this ragtag band of soldiers holding the bridge at all costs. By the time

Allied air support finally arrives, only two soldiers from the platoon remain, along with the captain, who has been shot. Private Ryan, who also survived the battle, is then seen holding the captain in his arms as the captain dies. As Private Ryan gazes into the fallen captain's eyes, the captain's raspy last words are "Earn this," and he breathes his last breath.

The camera then focuses on the young man's blue eyes, fading to those same eyes 50 years later, tearful, as he kneels with his wife, children, and grandchildren surrounding him before the captain's grave. Every day I think about what you said to me on that bridge," he says to the grave. "I've tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. I hope at least in your eyes, I have earned what all of you have done for me."

The same entreaty echoes today from the fallen: "Earn this." As you well know in this community, freedom is always costly. The question is: How will you honor such a price paid by those we honor here? This afternoon, as we honor those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in service for God and country, I urge you to reflect on how you might make your freedom life worthy of such sacrifice.