

**Remembrance Sunday • 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday before Advent (Proper 28),  
Year C**

**2 Thessalonians 3.6-13 • Luke 21.5-19**

**13 November 2022**

**Christ Church, Chelsea**

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‘Beloved’, says Paul in today’s New Testament reading, ‘keep away from believers who are living in idleness’ (2 Thess 3.6). There would be time enough on another day to ponder what he means by this, and why. But, given the nature of today’s commemorations, we do well to notice the intriguing choice that Paul has made with his language. For the Greek word he uses for ‘idleness’ is *ataktos*. And Paul’s readers would surely in this word have heard a military metaphor. For part of that word, *taktos*, has given us our English words ‘tactics’ and ‘tactical’. To be *ataktos* is to be *untactical*; the word is used in classical Greek to refer to disorderly, unsoldierly, behaviour. And that is not the only military language in that particular reading. Return to Paul’s opening words and you find that they, too, use military language: ‘We command you, beloved’.<sup>1</sup>

These statements are, as the theologian Cally Hammond puts it, useful reminders that the early Christians were perfectly content to draw on military language in their writing of the biblical texts. Sometimes, as here, it is in passing. Very occasionally, the connections between the life of the Christian and the life of the soldier are sketched more fully. I think most particularly of Ephesians chapter 6, with its extended call to the Christian to ‘put on the armour of God’ that we may ‘stand firm’ against the ‘powers of this present darkness’ (Eph 6.10-18).

To many of us gathered here today, the use of this military imagery to describe the holy life may be disconcerting. For our TV screens – and, for some of us, our personal experience – make us all too aware of the

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<sup>1</sup> On this military language in 2 Thessalonians, see Cally Hammond’s commentary, *Church Times*, 8 November 2022.

awful, brutal realities of war. In these last months our consciousness of those realities has probably come from Ukraine: videos of refugees clambering over bombed bridges, mass graves, and extrajudicial killings; testimony of torture; our awareness of those thousands around us in this borough, many deeply traumatised, who have fled settled lives in search of safety. War is grim. War is brutalising. War makes us weep for the suffering and injustice it brings, and we may suspect that it makes God weep too. War is an unavoidable reality of this world, and is firmly part of its broken, damaged nature. We may be confident that there will be no war in the new heaven and the new earth.

And yet... amidst these horrors, there are human virtues – deeply-formed traits of good character – that we may see exhibited in war more clearly than perhaps in any other setting of human life. Take one example. The recent biography *A Woman of No Importance* tells the story of Virginia Hall.<sup>2</sup> This tall American woman with a distinctive limp managed to live in Vichy France for 15 months, working for the British SOE spy organisation. She formed a local network of recruits, sheltered downed British airmen, and helped arrange a jailbreak for a dozen captured agents, before herself fleeing to Spain over an 8000 foot high pass in the Pyrenees in November 1942 – eighty years ago this month.<sup>3</sup> Just think of what character it must have taken to do this, amidst the ever-present dangers of betrayal and execution. What courage; what cunning; what resilience; what wisdom about human behaviour and motivation. Indeed, as her biographer Sonia Purnell puts it, Hall was ‘a human being with the flaws, fears and insecurities of the rest of us ... but they helped her understand her enemies’ (p.5). To what extent is it that her wartime service enables us to recognise what were virtues already formed in Hall; to what extent was it through the cauldron of war that these virtues took root? However it came about, such valour in the cause of good inspires both awe in me, and a longing to grow in such courage.

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<sup>2</sup> Sonia Purnell, *A Woman of No Importance*, (Virago, 2019)

<sup>3</sup> The escape is described in Purnell, *No Importance*, pp.185-9.

And we may see other virtues exhibited and formed amidst the horrors of war.<sup>4</sup> We may point to the loyalty and camaraderie – the enjoyment of and care for one’s fellow soldiers – that is formed in military units. The soldier who trains for war needs to learn discipline and self-control if they are to gain the physical fitness and mental readiness to function through crisis. The abuses of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and the like arose from soldiers who – through stress and trauma – lost their self-control and their commitment to justice; the formation of character that enables us to face violence and offer peace in return is character indeed. And then, perhaps most strikingly, we have the selfless commitment to others that is exhibited by so many soldiers. Think, say, of Matthew Croucher, who while on tour in Helmand Province in 2008, jumped on a Taliban grenade in order to save his comrades. He survived, protected by his backpack, but many others in similar situations have not.<sup>5</sup> Want to understand what the self-sacrifice of Christ involved? Sometimes we see it most vividly in the lives and action of those who for our tomorrow gave their today.

On Remembrance Sunday we remember the brutality of war. We allow ourselves for a short period to stare at its terrors, so as not to forget the true nature of the world that so many live in amidst the peace and comfort most of us enjoy. We pray for those who have suffered and died, in this country and around the world, in the wars of the last century and today. And yet Remembrance Sunday is also traditionally a time for thankfulness. And at the heart of that thankfulness is our gratitude for the effects of the goods – the godly qualities – that have been shown... and perhaps even formed... amidst the horrors of war. Courage. Loyalty. Cameraderie. Discipline. Self-control. Justice. Self-sacrifice. A willingness not to deny the realities of evil and violence but to face it, seeking not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good (Rom 12.21).

So perhaps it is no surprise that the biblical writers chose to use the language of warfare. For they lived in occupied lands, surrounded by

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller articulation of the Aristotelian understanding of virtue, and an analysis of the virtues important for soldiers in war, see David Fisher, *Morality and War: Can War be Just in the Twenty-First Century?*, (Oxford: OUP, 2011), chapter 6 ‘Virtues’

<sup>5</sup> He was awarded the George Cross.

garrisons of Roman soldiers. They knew the abuses of empire and conquest, and the terrors of the Roman response to revolt. But it seems that they also saw some of these same virtues we have named today in those soldiers around them. And they recognised that life as a Christian would sometimes be a battle with the powers of darkness – an experience of arrests and persecutions, of betrayal, of being hated by all (Luke 21.12-17). So, the biblical writers insist, be prepared. Grow in love; look for signs of Christ in the world. But in doing so have courage; be disciplined; be willing to suffer for what is good and true. And above all, whether it is the wars brought about by human pride and hatred, or the persecution for true faith, look to God. ‘O God, our help in ages past, / our hope for years to come, / be thou our guard while troubles last, / and our eternal home.’