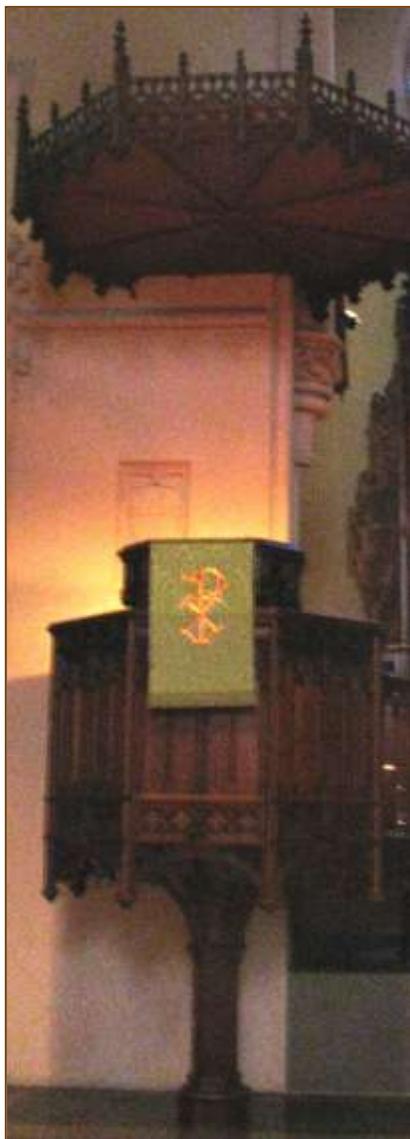


May 25, 2014  
Memorial Day Weekend

# Sermons

*from a church with a conscience*



“In True Memorium”

by

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*What would it mean at this critical moment in human affairs did we in the churches show growing graces and services! A church with a conscience out in front of its age and outdistancing its own best past, in a sense of responsibility for an entire world, in its stand for economic justice, in its demand for, and illustration of, mutual honor and fellowship among races – a church with members whose convictions and characters were ahead of their contemporaries, so that it pulled them forward and lifted them Godward! Then both we on the inside and those on the outside would be in no doubt that Christ is alive and in the midst of His churches and is using them to guide and inspire the world.*

Henry Sloane Coffin,  
Preaching at the Church of the Covenant,  
June 11, 1944

**“In True Memorium”**

**Isaiah 2:3–4**

**Colossians 3:12–17**

**Text: Psalm 33:17**

**The war horse is a vain hope for victory, by its  
great might it cannot save.**

In MEMORIUM, Latin meaning in memory, as a memorial to; used in obituaries, epitaphs, a remembering of poppies with thoughts of Flanders field. Did you know vets are not even allowed to give out the real flowers anymore? “Memorial,” a word attached to a holiday weekend filled with the aromas of hotdogs and hamburgers and stale beer by the time festivities are finished. Tennyson in his endless poem so named it; *In Memorium*.

*Strong son of God, immortal Love  
By faith, and faith alone, embrace  
Believing where we cannot prove:  
Thou madest death; and lo, thy foot  
Is on the skull which thou has made  
Thou madest man, he knows not why,  
He thinks he is not made to die  
And on he goes. . .*

Tennyson, who never saw a battle but who also wrote:

*All in the valley of death Rode the six hundred:  
'Forward, the light brigade! Charge for the guns (1)*

Last week a wreath was placed on the grave of Union Private William Chester the first of over four hundred thousand dead as the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Arlington National Cemetery was recognized. That event brought to mind a scene from seminary days. A classmate during the height of the Vietnam War had made a movie of his three year old son whom he had taken to a hill among those hallowed gardens of stone. He then drove to the bottom and had the youngster run pell-mell to daddy. There he came like a slalom skier weaving his way through the white crosses innocent to what was cradled beneath. It is a memory seared into my recall bank forever.

“That these honored dead shall not have died in vain,” said Lincoln, but how soon forgotten and to what end? Why is it politicians, most of whom have never seen even a skirmish nor have their children; how is it we let them beat the drums of war and patriotism as if the only way to stand tall is to slaughter as we become a less noble land than our founders visions could ever have imagined, war too often being the cowards answer to negotiations? What about those honored men and women? How many decay in VA hospitals out of sight and mind and how many more have had the miracles of modern medicine patch their bodies but not their minds? What of those Medal of Honor winners long forgotten because they were something other than white Anglo Saxon? At long last given a token of our devotion, posthumously for most, was not their blood as red and their courage not as golden, why then so conveniently ignored? We place flowers on graves before the cemetery is covered with tiny flags. But how better might we honor those who have given so much; that seems to me to be the ever hanging, over riding question.

“The ruler is not saved by a mighty army. The warrior is not delivered by strength. The war horse is a false hope in victory.” Maybe it’s that I’ve grown older and seen what awful things war can do and how little is accomplished by sacrificing our young on its alters that I am so moved to side with Harry Emerson Fosdick, himself a pacifist in World War II along with our own Phillip Smead Bird. Words spoken before the grave of the first unknown soldier, “It was an interesting idea to deposit the body of an unrecognizable (warrior) and yet how strange. The most stirring pageantry, this is the outcome of western civilization which for (more than) two thousand years has worshiped Christ and in which democracy and science have had their widest opportunities? That the whole nation should pause, it’s patriotic oratory flourish around the body of a soldier blown to bits on a battle field.”

“It is the warlords who picked him yet is he so utterly unknown? Of one thing we can be sure, he was of sound mind and body. All primitive god’s who demand a sacrifice insist the animals be the best. Can you think of anything madder than to pick a nation’s finest and put them on the battlefields of war?” I dare say with Fosdick we all have a score to settle between our souls and not only the unknown soldiers but all who have entered the fray the world over,

*For sometimes I think I hear (them) asking; 'where is this great new era the war was to create? They blew our eyes out, is that why we strain to see the prosperity, plenty and peace of our children for which our mangled bodies were lay down?*

It was not a pacifist but a field marshal who said. "It is the business of the churches, (the business of all peoples of faith who worship the creator of our family of human kind) it is their (our) job to make the business of war impossible!"(2) Yet what have the churches of this land and the faiths of every land done to make that happen?

Isaiah speaks one of the greatest prophetic passages of all time to us, "The Lord shall decide and nations must beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and study war no more." For we Christians the words tumble down even harder; "For unto us a son is given and his name is the prince of peace." "Yet we know more about war in our times than about peace, more about killing than about living." (3) When will we ever learn that life is consequential not only for individuals but even more so for nations; that we are punished not so much because we break God's commandments but rather that we are broken on them.

One of my favorite scenes comes in a film of Hermon Walk's *Winds of War* when Robert Mitchem, as Naval Commander Pug Henry stands on a bluff overlooking a devastated Pearl Harbor as his son sails off to battle. He gazes longingly up to the heavens and says, "O Lord, in a world so rich and lovely why is it your children can find nothing better to do but dig iron from the ground and work it into vast, grotesque machines to blow each other up. Is it because Abel's next door neighbor was Cain? Is it because my enemies make deadly engines and I must do it better or die? Maybe the vicious circle will end this time, maybe not (and sadly we know it has not). Maybe," he concludes, "it will take Christ's second coming and maybe it will never end." It is a sad commentary and we rightly say what can we do? What can anyone do given the ways of the world and the evil of our enemies? Yet I would say again with Fosdick; on this weekend when you stand to remember any combatant, if those around you seem to relish the valor being shown, remind them that this and every Memorial Day is the saddest of days in America,

even for the world. Saddest because of the continued repetition of evil that perhaps only God can deliver us from.

What should you and I do? St. Paul writes, "As God's people cloth yourselves in compassion, kindness, gentleness and patience. Forgive as God has forgiven you and most of all put on love which binds you together." The sum of the gospel is reconciliation. The whole action of God from the beginning of time to the end of days is the bringing together of that which is broken, separated, alienated! For Christians it is what Jesus was all about, God becoming one of us that we might become one with God and therefore that is the tack we must take if we are to be followers of this Jesus. A picture's worth a thousand words and a living monument is worth a million pictures.

That's the lesson of the chapel of reconciliation which is the bombed out shell of Coventry Cathedral in England. Looking at the un-reconstructed ruins reminds the visitor of the enmity between nations that produced it and its counterparts in Dresden Germany. It's so designed that it's impossible to enter the new and uplifting sanctuary without passing through the residues of human destruction. So it becomes a memorial not of hatred or revenge, nor even sorrow unappeased, but a reminder that the role of all people of faith is to heal the separated, bind up the broken and re-unite the estranged. That nothing will ever be right until we acknowledge that something is quite wrong with our world and within ourselves and that to truly honor those who have made great sacrifice, we need to do whatever it takes to see it does not happen again. That somehow we will study war no more!

This is not about sentimentality nor is it about disrespect for all who have served in causes not of our choosing perhaps but that we have engaged in all the same. This is about a true honoring of all who have sacrificed to create a better, kinder, more gracious and accepting planet. It is because of all of them that we need to carry on a lover's quarrel with our world and its leaders, but first within this land we love. A quarrel that results in the gaining of a right vision so that when we depart this life those who follow will affirm that we have left behind a little more truth, a little more justice, a little more beauty and a lot more peace than would have been the case had we not cared so deeply about all of our brothers and sisters of every race and creed, causing

us to think past who we are and what our world is like to a visioning of what together we might yet become. Only then will our knowledge be a light to other paths and our faith a living thing in the hearts of those who follow. Only then will our memorials be worthy of those who have given their last full measure of devotion.

- 1) Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Charge of the Light Brigade*
- 2) Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Tribute to the Unknown Soldier*, Riverside Church, 1933
- 3) General Douglas Haig
- 4) General Omar Bradley



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