

**Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2018**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday before Advent (B)/**  
**Remembrance Sunday**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Jonah 3.1-5,10**  
**NT: Hebrews 9.24-end**  
**G: Mark 1.14-20**

“Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.”

On the eleventh hour, on the eleventh day, of the eleventh month one hundred years ago across the Western Front there was.. silence. In contrast to the jubilation that greeted news of the Armistice at home, the reaction of many across the long string of battlefields scattered through Belgium and France was a stony-faced silence. So Reverend Michelle and I learnt at a screening of the film ‘They Shall not Grow Old’ an astonishing labour of love that restores sound and colour to archive footage from the First World War.

Many of the soldiers whose words we hear described how striking that silence was. After over four years of incessant artillery fire, the shouting of orders, the detonation of mines and the cries of the wounded there was, suddenly, silence. It seems appropriate therefore that we will be silent in under an hour’s time, when we come to remember those who did not see that silence in 1918.

Silence has as many social functions as there are people in the world- some of you will associate it with relief, others with being profoundly uncomfortable; for some it is where they find God, for others it is a void where an absence of God is most keenly felt. Silence has it’s more prosaic uses too- I can’t have been the only one who was told, repeatedly, as a child that ‘if you’ve got nothing constructive to say, then say nothing at all’.

I suspect that this was part of the reason why silence emerged as a way to mark the enormity of the conflict that ended in 1918- any other response would seem trite. In 1914,

Pope Benedict XV predicted that the First World War would be 'the suicide of civilized Europe' and, in 1918, he looked positively prescient. Retrospective explanations of the Great War as enabling a brave, fairer, more democratic new world to come into being seem, to my mind to fall short. The excesses of Hitler and Stalin made the Kaiser and the Tsar look like pussycats and the manifold failings of our own democracies today, the attempts by left and right seek to appropriate a marking (or lack thereof) of Remembrance Day, for their own petty hobby horses, suggest that silence seems more dignified, more appropriate than ever. If we've nothing constructive to say, then we are best saying nothing at all.

Silence too creates room for prayer, even when those who may not acknowledge it. For individuals to direct their thoughts to something bigger. The Bible, including the Book of Jonah, is filled with examples of those who turn to prayer, not for intercession or in expectation that it will work- Jonah himself is particularly cynical about this when it comes to the chances of the people of Nineveh changing their fate- but rather as a way of crying into what they conceive of as nothingness. Silence is a way of marking failures of humanity- the failure of humanity to be able to adequately explain, the failure of humanity to pursue peace, the failures of humanity that made sacrifice in conflict inevitable. Silence is an acknowledgement that we, the world, have failed.

Yet the silence is not a nothingness, indeed, it is not even silence at all. In it, as Elijah knew, the still small voice might be found if we are brave enough just to listen. The voice of the God who calls- who called on the shores of Galilee, and, most importantly, who called out in pain and suffering on the cross. The God who does not sit aloof, but the God who knows the extremes of the human existence in the person of Christ. Silence might be an acknowledgement that humans have failed, but it need not be a resignation that God has too.

We think of silence as the mark of the unknown, a concept that became all too real in the First World War. As the mud of Flanders claimed the physical remains of so many- their flesh and blood compounded into seeming nothingness by the mechanized horrors of war, the personhood of those soldiers was invariably lost to their fellow man; put another way, there were more unknown soldiers than just the one placed in the Abbey by a former Rector of this parish. And yet, they were not unknown. They are called, by name just as the first disciples were, by the God of the silence. Whether they lived through the war or gave their lives in it, they the Andrews, Simons, Jameses, and Johns be they from Garston or Great Crosby were known, and loved, as their namesakes were from Galilee.

This is the God who cuts through the forgetfulness and vanity of the world's ways- the white noise of humanity and calls them, us by name. The God, who in Christ Jesus knew unimaginable suffering himself, called, calls those first fishermen by name, called, calls, those who died forgotten and brutalized amidst the horror of the Somme or the Marne, called, calls, you and me today amidst the vain pomp of this world of words. And this God who calls is the same one who, as we hear in Hebrews, enters the sanctuary of Heaven, justified not by the blood we shed, but his own. Who, in love, by his sacrifice, takes our lesser sacrifices into the holy of holies.

On the eleventh hour, on the eleventh day, of the eleventh month one hundred years ago across the Western Front there was silence. And in the silence, he called them, he calls us.

“Immediately he called them...and they followed him.”

As we emerge from the silence, might we do the same.

Fr Fergus Butler-Gallie