

A sermon preached for the Service of Remembrance and Rededication of the VCGC Association, 9 November 2010: “You are the light of the world, the salt of the earth”.

Readings: 1 Samuel verses from chapter 17 – David and Goliath; Matthew 5.13-14 – You are the salt of the earth; You are the light of the world.

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world”.

“Actions speak louder than words” and preaching at this service is never going to be more than adding a footnote to extraordinarily courageous deeds. As chaplain to the Association I am struck each time we meet by the pleasure and slight bemusement of the holders of the Victoria Cross and George Cross at being held up and recognised in this way. Theirs is a very healthy modesty.

One seemed to me to speak for all when he told me, “It’s what anyone would have done. You do it for your mates.” Or from those whose awards have been given since we last met, Staff Sergeant Kim Hughes GC was reported to have said, “I was just doing my job”. Well, in a way, but in a way that the country recognises as acting on our highest ideals of courageous service. The understatement of the citations is very telling as in the phrase, “at no small risk to himself”. That is a reality underlined by the continuing physical and mental damage for some; as it is by awards that are made posthumously, as with the George Cross for Staff Sergeant Olaf (Oz) Schmid. As a boy, he was Head Chorister at Truro Cathedral. As a soldier, his commanding officer described him as, “the bravest and most courageous man I have ever met”.

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It’s a risky analogy to make, especially at the moment, but the wonderful thing about the Bible is that like the News of the World, “All human life is there”. Every young curate has to learn to take school assemblies and what Christians call the Old Testament provides a wonderful variety of compelling stories with which to engage youngsters, like David and Goliath. The young boy pitched against the giant warrior, the Israelite against the Philistine, whose very name has entered the language of what we despise about those who destroy culture, intelligence and learning. Heroism comes with values attached.

Goliath, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam, terrified the Israelite army. The small, young shepherd boy, David, who had protected his father’s flock from lions, slew the giant with a sling and just one of his five smooth stones. It is a Defence Minister’s procurement dream, which in the scriptures is told to show that right triumphs over might and goodness is stronger than evil.

Acts of courage come at a price, especially if part of you has been blown away, physically or mentally. We’re talking sacrifice here. Being part of this Association strengthens and supports one another with shared experience and shared learning. The Association sometimes helps the holders of these highest honours to take their public role, representing our highest ideals. Those of you in the armed services also represent your colleagues to the country, and remind us that when a country sends its forces to war it has a long-term duty of care, especially for the injured.

In the relationship between the Association and St Martin-in-the-Fields there is a happy coincidence. St Martin was a Roman soldier in the Fourth Century when Christians could not

be soldiers less because of the pacifism of the early Church and more because they could not swear an oath to the Emperor as God. After his baptism, Martin served the end of his term as a soldier caring for the army's sick and injured. He is therefore the patron saint of soldiers *and* of pacifists. He died on the 8th November 397 but his saint's day is the day of his burial, the 11th November which was also Armistice Day at the end of the First World War, our Remembrance Day.

In the First World War the most highly decorated soldier was Lance Corporal William Coltman VC, DCM and Bar, MM and Bar. He never fired a shot but as a stretcher bearer showed conspicuous bravery by carrying many wounded men to safety under heavy fire and without rest.

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Bravery is not the prerogative of combatants, as the George Cross recognises for civilians and military undertaking acts of great courage in extreme danger but not in the presence of an enemy. Last Saturday a concert was given here by refugees, the terribly abused medical victims of torture. They are more than survivors. They are immensely impressive, dignified and creative human beings. Theirs, too, is a form of courage. Life calls for the same values, whatever happens to us.

A continuous spirit of thanksgiving is hard to maintain in arduous circumstances. During the Thirty Years War to 1648, Martin Rinkhart was the pastor of the Saxon village of Eilenburg. As the rival armies of Europe pillaged and plundered his parish was struck by plague. Pastor Rinkhart buried 4,000 people, sometimes 50 a day. In the darkness of war, plague and famine he wrote the extraordinary hymn we have just sung as a grace after what must have been very meagre meals: ‘Now thank we all our God’. Giving thanks for everything is one of the insights of the Christian life, and knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Since our last meeting a number of your distinguished members have died including the very engaging Kevin Walton GC, engineer, mountaineer and Polar researcher. One of his sons-in-law, the composer and explorer David Fanshawe also died in July. A few years ago David and St Martin's broadcast his best known work, the African Sanctus. It combines the Church of England's Choral tradition with which David grew up at St George's Windsor, with the sounds of Africa including the Islamic call to prayer. David was an energetic visionary. Anyone who creates something new, persists and breaks new ground also requires a kind of courage. It is for this that we will pray when in a moment the choir begin our prayers with the Lord's Prayer from the African Sanctus.

Your Association sets the standard by which we are all both inspired and judged in this matter of bravery. Hard headed realism, combined with a willingness to put others before self, creates the courage to act for the good of all. It creates something new. This service is therefore of remembrance *and* rededication.

Remember, “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.” and rededicate yourselves to it.