

REMEMBRANCE DAY AT THE ROYAL HOSPITAL CHELSEA 2018

On a recent visit to America I was flying Delta Airways from Atlanta to St Louis. The plane was full, both first and standard class. Just before take-off the Chief Steward made an appeal, "We have on board someone from the military. Would anyone from first class be happy to give him their seat?". She did not have to ask twice. Immediately two men swapped places. At the end of the flight as the passengers passed the soldier in his uniform uniformly they all said, "Thank you for your service". It was a public recognition that here was a man who had heard the call of duty and had obeyed.

Here was the Military Covenant between soldier and society in action.

It's a covenant that comes into sharp focus this week end as we commemorate the Centenary of the end of the First World War. Liverpool where both the Chaplain and I served together, he as rector and I as bishop, will be remembering the sacrifices made by the Liverpool Scottish Regiment and not least by Captain Noel Chavasse, son of the then Bishop of Liverpool, who was the only soldier to be awarded the Victoria Cross with Bar in the Great War.

When his father, the bishop, heard the news of his death he wrote, "Our hearts are almost broken, for Oh how we loved him. Your dearest mother is pathetic in her griefwhat should we do in such sorrow as this...".

I feel I was baptised into the Military Covenant when at the age of eleven I went to board at the Duke of York's Royal Military School. After the war my father was commissioned and in 1959 was posted to Singapore to be the Commanding Officer of the Water Transport Division of the Far Eastern Land Forces.

We were stationed on Pulau Brani, the Island of the Brave, recently made famous by the meeting of the Presidents of North Korea and America.

The school now in Dover, whose motto is 'Sons of the Brave', was originally the nearby Duke of York's building and was founded by the grand old Duke of York for the orphans of the Napoleonic Wars. To this day it gives priority of admission to those children whose parents are killed or wounded in action.

When I came here last year I was struck by the fact that both the Duke of York's School and the Royal Hospital stood side by side. Together for centuries they have been a testimony to the Military Covenant for both orphans and veterans. They stand together as powerful symbols of the Nation's debt and gratitude, saying in stone to all who serve in the military, "Thank you for your service."

There were two days that stood out in the school calendar when I was a boy. The first was Grand Day with the Trooping of the Colour and the second was Remembrance Sunday when the whole school in our Blues Uniform marched to the War Memorial and stood to attention in silence. Heads bowed before the inscription in stone, "Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends". It left an indelible mark on my own soul. It was my generation saying to another, 'Thank you for your service'.

My flight to St Louis took me to a church in the week before Easter to speak about the suffering and sacrifice of Christ. In one meditation I spoke about how in his pain Jesus stood shoulder to shoulder with those who are tortured.

I remember how in my childhood in Singapore my father would always go quiet as we drove past Changi Prison. Although he was never imprisoned there the sinews of every soldier would tighten at the thought of the wounded and the tortured.

I pointed out in my meditation that when Jesus was being tortured he did not say, 'I forgive you.' Sometimes the cruelty and the memory of pain are so intense that you cannot in all honesty say, 'I forgive you'. So, on the cross, as Jesus is nailed to it, he prays instead, 'Father, forgive them'.

After the service I stood at the door. A tall, elderly, dignified, slightly stooped veteran took my hands in both of his. He had been captured by the North Koreans, imprisoned and tortured." Thank you", he said softly. "Thank you that I don't have to ..." his voice faltered and petered out. "... that I have only to ask the Father to forgive".

I imagine that not only did he feel it impossible to forgive his tormentors for the sheer brutality of their actions but that to do so would be a betrayal of those comrades who suffered and did not survive. Yet deeper still in his heart he knew that forgiveness from God was the only way to peace in the world.

The silent solidarity he felt with his comrades was yet another dimension of the Military Covenant which binds together all soldiers.

Coming from a military family I have always been struck by the reticence with which veterans speak of their experiences. The recent decision of some university students to refuse to sell poppies on their campus for fear of glorifying battle reveals only their ignorance of the reality of war. Veterans are the very last people in the world to glorify war. You alone know the true horror of it and how it haunts you silently to this day. It is an unspoken aspect of the Military Covenant between soldier and society that we respect that dignified silence.

Having served as Bishop to Prisons I know too that the impact of the trauma of war produces a stress that is difficult to identify and to treat, and that consequently there is a disproportionate number of veterans who have fallen outside of the law for lack of support.

These veterans are not just the casualties of war but casualties of the failure of society to find therapeutic and restorative ways of saying simply, "Thank you for your service".

Remembrance Day Services across the country and indeed around the world give us the opportunity to stand silently and to honour your silence. "We will remember them" is a promise to the fallen and to the survivors.

As we gather here so the Queen, the Prince of Wales and thousands of veterans gather around the Cenotaph in Whitehall. It has stood there for nigh on a Century. It is a symbol of national gratitude. Yet many do not realise that the word Cenotaph means 'an empty tomb'. It stands for the graves of all who for the sake of freedom have made the ultimate sacrifice and are known to God.

But it has another significance. It reminds us of another tomb without a body. The one vacated by our Servant Jesus Christ who died for our forgiveness and rose from the dead. By his Resurrection and emptying of the grave he sent a signal to the whole world that death is the dark gateway to light eternal. It is the final staging post between the land of the dying and the world of the truly alive. The tunnel through darkness to light.

Noel Chavasse gained his double VC by giving his life for the men he loved and saved. His last words were, 'Duty called and called me to obey'. He asked the nurse who tended to him to tell these dying words to his fiancé. Today we thank God for his service and for yours.

A few years earlier his grandmother had died. She was the author of many hymns. Noel shared her beliefs. One verse in particular echoed their faith. It is a hymn of hope for such a day as this. Across the Great Divide it binds the living and the dead in faith, hope and love eternal.

This is that hymn:

“Thine forever! God of love

Hear us from thy throne above;

Thine forever may we be

Here and for eternity”.

Amen.

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE