Requiem for The Great War

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Saint Clement's Church
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

November 12, 2017

We come together for this Requiem service on this Veteran's Day Sunday to remember and to honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice a century ago.

My wife, Libby, and I are grateful to Father Rick Alton and to Mrs. Barbara Alton for this kind invitation.

Between July 1914 and November 1918, over eighteen million men, women and children perished in World War One or the Great War as its combatants called it.

It was a staggering and incalculable loss of human life. And it was, at that point, the greatest number of dead in any event in human history.

Its' toll has been exceeded only by the Second World War—a war that was born in the ashes of the first.

The Great War was utterly transformative. It saw the first use of armored offensive troop deployments with the invention of the tank.

It saw the first use of combat aircraft not just to observe enemy troop movements but to duel and fight in the air.

Libby and I visited a beautiful memorial in Paris this past spring to the American volunteer pilots—the Lafayette Escadrille-- who flew for France before America's entry into the war.

In the elegiac tribute to them set in the monument's stone is this simple epitaph: "They fell from the sky".

Among them was 18-year old Quentin Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt's youngest son, killed in the last months of a horrible and needless war.

The Great War saw the first bombing of troops and civilians, cities and villages from above. It set in train the evolution of destruction from the heavens that has terrorized our history since.

Two decades later saw the merciless Luftwaffe bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica in 1937 memorialized by Picasso. Then the bombing of English cities and

towns during the Battle of Britain in 1940. Then the firebombing by US and British planes of Dresden and Leipzig in the closing months of World War Two. Then Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Then the planes carrying nuclear terror in our skies during the Cold War. And in recent months the savage Russian and Syrian barrel bombing of innocent civilians in Syria.

Humans had not had to endure terror literally raining down from the skies until the Great War. It changed the world forever.

The Great War of 1914-1918 was indeed transformative. And it was also epochal, shaping the history of the one hundred years since the war's end.

The war was accidental in its origins. A series of mistakes and miscalculations. There can thus be no justification for the millions who perished in its flames.

And the peace conference that followed the war-- at Versailles in 1919-- was unnecessarily vindictive, sowing the seeds of an even more horrible war twenty years later.

President Woodrow Wilson called at Versailles for a new League of Nations to prevent another catastrophic war from breaking out in Europe. But, when the U.S. Senate rejected the League in 1920, we Americans pulled back from the world, into isolation. We chose not to help Britain and France resist the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy in the 1930s. This episode is surely a warning to us today of the perils of isolationism in a complex and dangerous world.

The War's end saw the collapse of four empires.

The collapse of Austria-Hungary left a gaping strategic void in the heart of Central Europe.

The collapse of Imperial Germany led in menacing twists and turns to the rise of a young Austrian Corporal embittered by Germany's defeat. Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime took power a quick 13 years later, leading to the greatest loss of life and the greatest moral catastrophe in human history.

The collapse of the Russian Empire one hundred years ago this week gave birth to a heartless and atheistic communism that killed millions of souls and destroyed the spiritual and temporal life of the Russian people for seven long decades. It lingers in the aggression and paranoia of the cynical, embittered Soviet-made man who leads the Kremlin today.

And the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the Great War's end after a half a millennium of its rule radiating outward from Constantinople across Asia Minor and the Middle East, produced a twice promised land in Palestine, the creation of four weak and artificial

states in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Jordan and the chaos, disunion and violence that mark that tortured region today.

The Great War has had earthshaking consequences for Great Power politics down to this day.

Our Requiem this morning, however, is most properly devoted not just to the vanished geopolitical landscape of August 1914.

This Requiem is for the combatants as well as for the women and men, boys and girls, sisters and brothers, grandmothers and grandfathers who lost their lives or their loved ones in Europe and the Middle East one hundred years ago.

Paul Fussell catalogues in his exquisite book, “The Great War and Modern Memory” the crushing impact of the war on the spirit and hopes and dreams of an entire generation of Europeans.

Germany lost several million young men in brutal trench warfare across Western Europe.

France saw much of its Northern territory destroyed by a cruel, inexorable war machine that led to more than one million deaths at one battle alone—the Somme-- in the awful summer of 1916. Libby and I have driven north of Amiens and its beautiful cathedral to observe the thousands of monuments, large and small, to the heroic soldiers on both sides who lost their lives in war.

Britain is still scarred from the devastation of an entire generation of young men from the dockyards of Liverpool, from Welsh coal mine and from the playing fields of Eton and Harrow.

It was the disillusionment of the soldiers themselves that was recalled in the poems of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon that I first read at Boston College forty years ago when Reverend Alton and Barbara Alton and Libby and I met and became friends.

During the war, Wilfred Owen wrote poems of staggering sadness and beauty from the front lines. He died in battle just one week before the war ended. His mother actually received the notice of his death on Armistice Day as the bells in her village were ringing joyously to mark the end of fighting

One of Owen’s poems describes a gas attack on a line of British soldiers on the Western Front. Here are some of Owen’s final lines as he paints a picture of a young man dying of mustard gas in his lungs:

“If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin,

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs

Bitter as the cud,

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest to children ardent for some desperate glory

The old lie: Dulce et Decorum Est, Pro Patria Mori.”

Dulce et Decorum Est, Pro Patria Mori.

A line borrowed from the Roman poet Horace: “Sweet and Just to die for one’s country.”

That poem rings a warning bell one hundred years later from the disaffected young Brits who fought in a fruitless war.

And that warning is to us.

A warning that our leaders today must be mindful of as they talk sometimes too blithely of waging wars of choice-- on the Korean Peninsula and in the Middle East. The Great War reminds us of the danger and risk of starting a war when we can never be sure where it will lead, how many will die and when it will end.

We Americans had our own experience in the Great War. Neutral for its first three years, we went rushing in “Over There” in April 1917 to fight “the war to end all wars” after our neutrality had been violated one too many times by the German Navy.

Before it was over, two million young American men had sailed across the pond to the devastated battlefields of Belgium and France. Underestimated at first by Europeans quick to assume their natural superiority over the New World, the Americans more than made their mark.

In fact, it was General Pershing’s American Expeditionary Force that held the line west of Paris against a massive German offensive in the Second Battle of the Marne in summer 1918. We recall with pride where they fought-- at Belleau Wood and Chateau Thierry. The Marines and the U.S. Army stopped the Germans and helped France and Britain to win the war.

Among those valiant soldiers was a young, aspiring writer from Pittsburgh named Hervey Allen—Libby's Great Uncle.

Lietenant Allen led his men through some of the most vicious fighting of the war in July-August 1918 as they fought the German army in hand to hand combat across French fields and in small French villages.

Allen's unit was decimated, a majority killed and wounded. Nearly everyone gassed. He survived to write a luminous and haunting account of character and nobility, of battle and survival—called "Toward the Flame." In it, he described "rivers of men" marching toward the flames of war.

The Great War came to an end, as we all know, on the 11th hour, of the 11th day, in the 11th month--- 99 years ago yesterday.

We cannot bring back the dead and raise them up again. We cannot recreate the shattered lives and vanished hopes of their lost and all too often forgotten generation.

But we can Remember. And we can offer this Requiem for the repose of their souls.

The ancients understood how important it was to remember those who had made a great sacrifice.

Homer's lament in the Odyssey of a dying soldier—Remember me. Remember me. "Heap my mound by the churning gray surf. So even men to come will learn my story."

And the great Thucydides who wrote:

"But the bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet, notwithstanding, go out to meet it."

That is why we are right to remember this morning the soldiers, sailors and airmen of the Great War who died for us and for our liberty.

May they rest in peace.