

CHESTER CATHEDRAL

Royal British Legion 90th Anniversary 10.7.11

Sermon by Canon Christopher Humphries (Vice-Dean and Precentor)

Question. What do Winston Churchill, Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela have in common? On the face of it they were from different races and nations. Only one of them is still alive. Churchill is best known for his leadership in the dark days of the Second World War. Mother Teresa for her long years of work with the poor in Calcutta in India. Nelson Mandela for his lifetime's struggle for justice in South Africa, first spending so many years in prison, and then unbelievably as the nation's first black President, when Apartheid had finally been overthrown. On the face of it their stories are so different, and yet...their lives continue to inspire millions because in their own way, they all persisted and fought against the odds. Churchill in the 1930s was at times a lone voice in Parliament, warning of the dangers of the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis in Germany. He did not flinch when the odds seemed stacked against this country after the Fall of France in 1940 when Britain stood alone. He gave confidence to the nation by his gift of inspiring speech "We shall never surrender". PAUSE

Mother Teresa's voice was rarely heard over the media. She became known only gradually over the years of her sustained work among the poor. The view of many in India is a fatalistic one that people are born into a different caste or class and that you can't change it. Mother Teresa's view was a total contrast. Her model was Jesus Christ himself and his deep concern for the outcasts. Unlike Churchill, Mother Teresa did not make speeches. Tough and weather beaten, she did not go into Calcutta with a strident message. Founding the Sisters of Charity, she and they gave a quality of unselfish love and service to the poor that continues to make a real difference. Their actions were their message. PAUSE

Nelson Mandela has this gift of looking happy and serene, but don't let that fool you. In his life he has shown unshakeable faith, hope, and the courage to speak out for justice when he knew the odds were stacked against him. Time and again he was put in jail. From his cell on Robin Island, within sight of Cape Town, he must have wondered whether his dreams for South Africa would ever be realised. PAUSE

Churchill, Mother Teresa, Mandela. Three very different people but with this in common. They believed things could be better. They believed they

had a role to play and could make a difference. And their belief could not be shaken though they all had to go through dark and difficult times. That's why they all inspire us.

But don't you find that heroes of the world can seem light years away from what you and I think we can do?

And then I think back to a song from my childhood:

SING "Jesus bids us shine with a pure clear light,
Like a little candle burning in the night,
In this world of darkness, so we must shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine."

Yes, these days it sounds a bit twee, but it contains a powerful message. It allows you and me to recognise that the great tasks...

Making this world a better place, showing love to the unlovely, giving generous service to our fellow men and women, working for reconciliation and peace...

all these great tasks must involve ordinary men and women. And that's where we come to the work of the Royal British Legion and the thousands upon thousands of veterans and their families who have been helped, healed and blessed over the 90 years since the Legion was founded.

St. Paul gives us a wonderful phrase in our 2nd bible reading today.

"Treasure in clay jars" or other translations say "Treasure in earthen vessels". That's worth contemplating. A clay jar or an earthen vessel has a limited life, fragile, handle with care. You and I are mortal, we're only here on this earth for a while. But the main purpose of the vessel is to contain something; something that's worthless, or something that has value and meaning. St Paul sees us as containing treasure, as he says "so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." There you have it. There's the secret. Try to tackle the big problems of the world or even the little problems of your life on your own and you won't get very far. Tap into the life-giving power of God and things start to change.

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; persecuted by men, but never abandoned by God" says Paul. God's loyalty to us and his love for us is something we can trust and rely on.

"We are perplexed" says Paul "At our wit's end, but never at our hope's end".

You'd be a pretty unusual person if you never knew a period of doubt or darkness – a time when life is anything but straightforward. The difference for the person with faith is the dogged and persistent hope that life is going somewhere, and in fact that our times of testing are precious

to God. Jesus himself, nailed to that cruel cross was beyond the limit of what any human being should be put through. But his words to his torturers were these “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

“Struck down “says St Paul “Knocked down but not knocked out”. If we fall, if we fail, we can rise again. Treasure in clay jars. If we simply acknowledge our weakness and tell God we need him, then the power released within us is nothing less than that which raised Jesus from the dead.

So don't be downhearted by the way the world seems to be. Things can and do change. Whether it be the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the fall of the “News of the World”, there comes a time when truth and decency and worthwhile values will prevail. In key moments, people find the courage to challenge evil and to make a stand.

Stick to your values, maintain your faith and belief, and little old you and little old me can play our part in making the world a better place.

Finally, for me, the 90th anniversary of the Royal British Legion displays that extra dimension of comradeship. A concept that embraces fellowship and loyalty. Comradeship. A duty of love and care for those who are your brothers and sisters. Generosity of Spirit. Standing by each other when the going gets tough.

You can see how these values are rooted and grounded in the Christian faith. Which is why we're here in Chester Cathedral 90 years on to thank God for the witness and work of the Legion so far, and to pray that its work and mission may continue because we believe that there are many hurts to be healed following the conflicts of recent years right up to the present day.

“In this world of darkness, so we must shine. You in your small corner and I in mine”

The Royal British Legion, and indeed the Christian Church, shows us that while illuminating the small corners that are part of our daily lives, we can also collaborate and join together in shining out for God. Inspired and empowered by the love of Jesus Christ himself, the light that shines in the darkness, and that the darkness can never quench or put out.