

## Unknown Soldier, Unknown Servant 12.11.06

On the morning of 11 November 1920 the Unknown Warrior was drawn in a procession to the Cenotaph in London, on a gun carriage pulled by six black horses. Many of the people who lined the streets to watch the cortège pass had been waiting all night. At 11 o'clock, everyone fell silent for two minutes, and the Last Post sounded. The body of the Unknown Warrior was then taken on its way, followed by the King and ministers of state, to Westminster Abbey. It was borne to the west end of the nave through a guard of honour of 100 holders of the Victoria Cross, and buried there.

The organisers were taken completely by surprise by the response of the people to the ceremony. At least 40,000 people passed through the Abbey before the doors were closed that night. The pilgrimage past the Cenotaph and the grave of the Unknown Warrior went on throughout the weekend, and by the time the tomb was closed on 18 November, 1,250,000 people visited the Abbey, and the site is now one of the most visited war graves in the world.

The text inscribed on the tomb: 'They buried him among the Kings, because he had done good toward God and toward his house' is based on words from the Bible (2 Chron 24:16)

The soldier "unknown by name or rank" was the focus for an extraordinary outpouring of emotion and became a kind of national symbol for grief, at once individual and for all: he could be any mother's son, anyone's father or brother. Many nations followed suit (List) Millions paid their respects. Often inscribed "Known only to God."

## Who is this unknown servant?

"Surely he has born our infirmities and carried our diseases .. struck down by God and afflicted .. he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities ... upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him, the iniquity of us all." Isaiah 53 1 – 6.

For us he was wounded, crushed, punished so that we could be ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven as we have just sung in our hymn and as Handel's Messiah so confidently proclaims. The early church made the connection with Jesus Christ as the person identified by the prophet Isaiah, who makes us whole, acceptable to God, fit for his kingdom.

The unknown soldier gives his life for values such as those expressed in the declaration of independence – "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all people are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

These are biblical ideas which speak about the relationship of God to all people, that the blessings of liberty are there for all. This is more than just the American dream but God's ambition for the whole world. We are likely to agree that the form of government likely to deliver this is a democracy.

### **What have they achieved?**

Why do men and women give their lives in war? It will be from a mixture of motives. "Our today for your Tomorrow" often sums it up. Some go to war carried along on a wave of patriotism, because their friends are going, because their sweethearts would give them a white feather if they didn't. The Pals regiments of the first war, were recruited like this. I spoke recently to a rear gunner who flew in Lancaster bombers. "We didn't think about it really. We were young and lived day to day. It was very exciting. Tail gunners had a life expectancy of three weeks. This is a long way from the altruism of 'God's ambition for the world.'"

The unknown soldier reminds us that we cannot repair our broken world on our own because of the brokenness and acute vulnerability of our own humanity. This is true of all wars in history and we are daily reminded of it today. We remember today those caught up in something greater than themselves, who gave more than they expected. We admire their qualities of courage and sacrifice and we give thanks for them today. WW 1&2, Korea, Suez, N Ireland, Iraq, Afghanistan. Every nation has its own litany before the tomb of the unknown soldier.

We wear our red poppies today as a reminder of those who have died, but also to remember that tough moral decisions often involve choosing the lesser of several evils, often at greater cost to ourselves.

The unknown servant speaks of God's intervention in history and in time, through his only son, to share in our failure and futility and to suffer the worst consequences of it in a cruel death on a cross, to begin the realization of God's dream. The dream is the fulfillment of God's kingdom, it's values and blessing for all people in a new heaven and a new earth enjoyed by a new humanity. Light out of darkness, glory out of failure and life out of death. Our ultimate hope.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying 'se the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away ... See I am making all things new. Amen