

A SERMON PREACHED IN THE CHURCH OF THE RESURRECTION,
NEW YORK, ON REMEMBRANCE DAY 2010

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It is very good to be with you this morning and I am more than grateful to Father Swain for his invitation to preach yesterday for the Guild of All Souls Annual Requiem at St John's, Newport, and to-day in this splendid church on this solemn occasion.

XIn the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few years ago, the Royal Academy in London mounted an enormous exhibition called Ancient Art to Post-Expressionism, which included everything from Greek statues and Roman reliefs to nineteenth century sculpture and twentieth century painting. It was not especially well-received by the critics, but for me, the price of my ticket was justified as soon as I stepped into the first gallery which housed a life-size bronze sculpture. Designed by Antonin Mercié who had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and entitled Gloria Victis, "Honour to the Vanquished", the piece was completed in 1874 after the French defeat by Prussia in war a few years earlier. Let me try to describe it. A young and beautiful soldier is clutching the hilt of a broken sabre which cannot be prised from his hand even in death. His lifeless body is held and supported by a winged angel who is bearing him upwards. We seem them at the very moment of take-off. The torsos of man and angel are twisted together, the wings reach out to their widest point and there is a great sense of power and purpose about the composition. The original bronze was placed in the town hall in Paris as a memorial to the fallen and copies soon appeared across France.

But what did the sculpture say to the people of France then, what did it say to the parents and wives of soldiers who had died in battle and what does it say to us on this Remembrance Sunday? Well, there is an overwhelming contrast between the fragility of the young man's body and the steadfast power of the supporting angel. That recognition of the fragility of life has been borne home to us during the last decade in our own countries and in wars abroad, both concluded and ongoing. No decree of technological superiority can ultimately defend coalition soldiers or the innocent victims of terrorism. Their own bodies are as fragile as those of the enemy they are fighting. On the other hand, the angel's invulnerability and strength come straight from God and place him beyond the reach of conflict, suffering and death. This sculpture is not just a statement or a reminder of our weakness. In the very angles and surfaces of the bronze we can see a human body being supported, upheld; in the beat of the angel's wings we can sense an imminent upward movement in which this young warrior will be borne away out of conflict and will be transfigured out of death by the power of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Fragility and brokenness on the one hand. On the other, the hope of a new and indestructible life on the far side of death. This is what we find in Mercié's wonderful sculpture, but it is also the bright promise which runs right through our Scriptures. Each and every human life is balanced upon this point. Especially and most vividly it is a contrast which we recognise in the lives of those who have died to preserve peace, liberty and security in the face of tyranny and evil.

But our 'remembering' this morning is not merely conventional, nor can it remain only an aesthetic response to a work of art. Christ's sacrifice and his resurrection-victory are the substance of our worship today and it is to heavenly worship that Mercie's angel is ascending and to which he lifts up his human cargo, so:

☞ Through Christ we offer our prayers for those who have died in the service of their country

☞ From Christ we receive the assurance of a merciful welcome in eternity, a rest for those who were overburdened

☞ In Christ, united with him through the Sacrament of His Body and Blood, we are joined together with those for whom we pray today, all of us alike the inheritors of St Paul's great promise, that: having died with Christ, we shall return to life with him. Christ, as we know, having been raised from the dead, will never die again. Death has no power over him any more.

On this Remembrance Sunday, we trust and pray that those who have fallen in war may know the near presence of almighty God and are now rejoicing with the angels in that eternal life which is his gift. To him be all honour, glory, power and dominion now and unto the ages of ages. Amen.