

Homily

Luc Ferrier, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, 10 November 2019

When I created The Forgotten Heroes 14-19 Foundation six years ago, I never could have imagined to be in a place like this in the United States of America; not even a few months ago, when I was invited to give a presentation at Trinity Episcopal Church in Sonoma. When I provided the title of that speech last September—"Humanity does not Abandon Mankind to Darkness"—I had only the First World War in mind.

But when I arrived from London a few weeks ago, I realized that this title was also a perfect summary of the unbelievable solidarity exhibited here in California during the recent wildfire disasters. I saw people in Sonoma, Petaluma and other small villages opening their homes to refugees who were forced to evacuate. All this was done spontaneously and without any personal gain.

Humanity in California, indeed, does not abandon mankind to darkness.

Speaking today at this important commemorative event, before people who truly represent the core values of being humane, is therefore an incredible honour.

The last six years of research, discovering thousands of unknown personal documents from soldiers of all religious beliefs and none in the First World War, has taught me that I still know nothing except the fact of my ignorance. This ignorance makes me very humble.

And it is with this humility, as a grandchild of a modest World War 1 soldier, that I salute the American people for the enormous sacrifices they made, one hundred years ago, in a war not of their making.

The First World War was one of the greatest of human catastrophes, with more than fifty million dead and wounded worldwide and another fifty million victims of the ensuing deadly influenza epidemic.

Many of your ancestors joined my Belgian grandfather in battle in 1917. They were among the 4.7 million American soldiers who paid a heavy price: 116,000 deadly casualties in a single year.

But my grandfather was also joined by at least four million Muslims. Not only from the former British and French colonies but also from Russia and China. And, yes, there were also Muslims from Canada and the United States who answered the call to arms. At least five thousand American Muslims enlisted. And all of them served with honour, loyalty and dignity.

The words “Islam” and “Muslim” are politically loaded terms, provoking reactions depending on where in the world you are. This is nothing new: other religious and cultural communities have expressed similar sentiments. It appears that society always needs to have a scapegoat. However, there are at least two sides to every coin. While on one side, discrimination, hate and antagonism are brewing; on the other, friendship, love, respect and solidarity can be found.

My research is focused on the impact of war on the individuals who served in World War One, and I discovered the beauty of humanity when and where you would least expect to find it.

I learned that for these millions of soldiers in the trenches, religion, colour, political conviction and language were not a real issue. The only thing they wanted to know was: “Are you with me? Will you watch my back? Will you not leave me behind?”

Being brothers in arms was the only way to survive and make it back home.

Among the personal diaries I found are numerous heart-warming accounts of Muslim, Christian and Jewish soldiers fighting united, side-by-side, sharing their experiences and accommodating each other's culture, music, gastronomy and religious practices, despite the difficult conditions in the trenches.

Furthermore, chaplains, priests, rabbis and imams went out of their way to learn Arabic, Hebrew, English and French in order to accommodate religious burials of the dead on the battlefield.

If soldiers, then, could accept and accommodate each other in the trenches during wartime, what's stopping us from doing the same today?

I also discovered that these men were not only fighting a physical war in a gruesome environment, they were also engaged in another fierce battle, a battle we rarely talk about—a fight for their soul.

They spent weeks and months in filthy trenches, in the freezing cold or burning sun. They were wounded. They had lost their friends and family. They had seen atrocities. They had been promised the war would only last a month, but they were still fighting three or four years later and still had not advanced a mile. They had been engaged in battles losing sometimes more than 30,000 men in one day—30,000 men in one day—ending up in the same trench they had left at dawn. No victory.

And then, in the middle of another senseless battle, some of the enemy in front of them surrenders. They have a few prisoners of war! This is the moment which many of these soldiers—of all religions—write about in their letters. They pray for strength, they pray for guidance, because they know...they know that Evil NOT only comes to us when we are weak. Evil, and I mean real Evil, also comes to us when we are strong—*especially* when we are strong!—when we have power, when we can take revenge, when we can decide on life and death, when we have the ability to choose how much pain we will inflict, to be merciful or not.

That's when Evil reaches out to us. That's when these Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu soldiers knew their faith was in grave danger.

This is why *we* must pray for every soldier so that they will have the strength, when evil reaches out to them in combat, to make the right decision.

And this is why *we* must do more to support the veterans who have encountered that horrible moment, because we were not there with them to give them the backup they needed.

Religion is about so much more than just believing in something unseen. It is a synergy of mind, body and spirit that can empower an individual to overcome any kind of adversity. Wars are fought in the name of religion, which is so stupid because religion fights in the name of humanity.

We really do need to *learn* from our *shared history*.

We need to learn from these World One heroes—of all faiths and none—that these men and women here with us today, in front of me, and their brothers and sisters in arms all around the United States and abroad, are amazing human beings who deserve our greatest respect not only for putting their lives at stake for us, but also their very souls.

If we can do this, then—and only then—will the sacrifice of those millions of World War One soldiers not have been in vain.

Thank you.