

# Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

Bishop Richard – Sermon

May Blitz Anniversary

2nd May 2011



Diocese of  
Liverpool

Remembering is an uncertain business. At any age, memories are subjective and selective – just ask witnesses to an accident and you will be surprised how differently something recently experienced will be recalled. So remembering the events of 70 years ago is not an easy task, but one that has been helpfully and wonderfully done for us by Simon Ryan, who has brought to us some of the horror and the bravery upon which we have come to reflect this morning.

Some may wonder whether it is meaningful for us to continue to do this so long after these events. It is. Firstly, it is important for society to have a corporate memory – for there to be certain great events which we remember with gratitude or sorrow. Memory in a community, like memory in an individual, is formative of identity. It is important for us to have a civic sense – and there is little enough in the way of communal memory that links us to one another through our past.

Secondly, the two world wars of the 20th Century keep before us the terrible cost of war. Most wars seem to us now to have been fought for trivial reasons. It is important that no one should ever think that war is a light matter, or that it should be imbued with the romantic aura it has often attracted in the past. The human cost of war is terrible. We need this truth always before us.

Thirdly, the life we enjoy now has been made possible by the sacrifices of others. Whether or not they fully knew what they were doing and whatever motives they may have had, they were killed or maimed, defending a society whose values we cherish and whose fruits we now enjoy. Jews who survived the Concentration Camps live with a constant sense that they represent all those who perished. That awareness should extend to us.

It is true that our attitude to war is now different from, and possibly healthier than, that of the past. But the nature of conflict has changed in a way that makes our Commemoration Service this morning particular appropriate and deeply unsettling. In 1941 everyone was making sacrifices: there was absolutely no question of whether the sacrifice had been worthwhile – for our tomorrow they had given their today. Because of what they had done, the price they had paid, we enjoy freedom.

War seemed very simple then, You knew what it was about and who the enemy was, and everything was at stake. The outcome would be either victory or defeat, freedom or slavery. Whatever the cost, we had to win and when the war was over, it would end, peace would be declared and slowly but surely normal life would be rebuilt.

But war isn't simple now. Is it really in defence of the nation? What is really for? Who is the enemy? Will it ever end? And will we know? In a "war against terror" there is unlikely to be any armistice, no nationally agreed terms of peace. Osama bin Laden may be dead but as the Foreign Secretary reminded us "elements of Al Qaeda are still active" and that we must be even more vigilant. This is sobering stuff, indeed. After 9/11 and 7/7 can anything ever be described as "normal" again? What we now know is that all our communities are not the unfortunate victims and casualties of war, we are its intended targets. We are now the front-line.

So how do we, a tolerant society, deal with the intolerant? Tolerance, on its own, can never be sufficient, We have to take steps to limit the steps of the intolerant.

But we cannot resolve differences or build a common life together and tackle the big issues which face us today without an overarching vision, without principles and values in common. As the Archbishop of York has said that tolerance is not enough: we desperately need to find a new way forward and a common vision, which he develops like this:

It is a vision rooted on our need for God, our need for each other and a recognition of our interrelatedness. We cannot say "I can do without you" for we all rely on each other for our well-being. Unless we are all involved in developing and achieving a new vision, it will not work. –

What I am saying is: We need the practical contribution that all of us can and must make, just as in 1941 that is what was required for survival. That is the spirit our country, our world so desperately needs again.

Our communities must surely be models of that Heavenly City, places which give us a glimpse of what heaven will be like where there will be reconciliation, love and justice. The vision of the Holy City is one of a place filled with people from all nations, coming together with all the treasures of their culture and civilisation. Nothing is excluded in the Holy City except that which is contrary to the character of God.

But to realise that vision here on earth, all of us are needed to help. In the poetic words of John Donne "No man is an island, entire of itself.... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind." But even brutal death is redeemable. At the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa a woman was hearing about her son's murder,. At the end, the chair of Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, asked the woman if she had anything to say to the Police Officer who had ordered her son's brutal killing. She responded:

"I am very full of sorrow. So I am asking you now – come with me to the place where he died, pick up in your hands some of the dust of the place where his body lay, and feel in your soul what it is to have lost so much. And then I will ask you one thing more. When you have felt my sadness, I want you to do this. I have so much love, and without my son my love has nowhere to go. So I am asking you – from now on, you be my son, and I will love you in his place..... I can say this – I can only do this, because Jesus loved me and gave himself up for me."

Jesus is able to change this "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" world into a "lion lying down with the lamb" world. As Jesus says in St Matthew's Gospel (7:12) "In everything do to others as you would have them to do you." In our fearfulness, especially in times of peril and conflict, let us be very careful we do not react by taking the pre-emptive strike: "Do it to others before they do it to you." We pray that God will give us courage in a world that is often threatening to renew our commitment to our neighbour.

**Amen.**

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Bishop of Warrington**