

St John the Baptist, Catford

Remembrance

Wisdom 6:12-16

Psalm 70

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

'Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour!'

How many of us have literally had to keep awake, as we watch or wait? Perhaps with an ill or dying person, or with a new baby.

Our soldiers, sailors and airmen and -women have perhaps had to keep awake more than any of us when engaged in warfare on our behalf.

A number of years ago now I met a senior army officer and his wife while on holiday, a Field Marshall no less, and was a little surprised when his wife told me that he still kneels at the bedside to pray every night. I don't know why I was surprised – perhaps it didn't fit with my uninformed stereotype of what a soldier is like, but, going for a walk with him on another occasion, I remember him asking me, *'When are you closer to God than when facing death down the barrel of a gun, what?'*

And he made me think rather differently about what your average soldier is like. There may be the banter and course humour simply to get through and for the sake of camaraderie, but they actually have to face death in a way that we civilians rarely do.

In facing death, and risking it for the sake of the rest of us, many service men and women come to address the bigger questions of our existence: they have to, separated from their loved ones, and having to consider what will happen should they die.

'One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for she will be found sitting at the gate. ... [O]ne who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care, because she goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought.'

I'm not suggesting that this is the case for every member of the armed forces, but from speaking to friends who have been army chaplains, it is often the case.

The pressure, and fear, of death, can of course also break men and women.

And it is their taking the risk of that, as well as the more physical danger they face, that we salute and honour at this time of year. We salute those who are serving now, to keep our country safe and to protect others in far-flung parts of the world.

And we salute those who have given their lives of course, particularly those who have been known to us.

We have prayed for those whom we have loved but see no longer more generally at All Souls last week, but now we do something slightly different, which is to give thanks for the contribution which those who

have died for our country, and for the peace and liberty which we enjoy, have made; as well as to remember them and what they have given.

I think we can also learn something from the perspective of my holiday friend for our own sakes though. In the midst of our own rather more mundane worries, we can think of the combination of alertness and contemplation which he described. When facing the possibility of immediate death over a period of time, the now becomes all that matters; and you are forced to think on what most matters to you. In Peter's case, his absolute faith and trust in God.

No danger for him of being caught unawares like the foolish virgins. His daily dependence on God taught me a lot about what it is to live in the moment, with a

keen sense of God in our lives, being ready to meet Him at any point.

Would we be ready in a similar way to come face to face with the living God today? Could we render an account of ourselves?

Have we loved God with all our heart, soul and mind today, and our neighbours as ourselves? Not, did we do a good turn a few weeks ago, but are we living out our Christian vocation today?

And so, this Remembrance Sunday, I ask you not just to remember, though we do that, but also to ask you what we can learn from our service men and women about what we're set on this earth for. Amen