

This gospel passage was a favourite of Br Herbert who passed away just over a year ago now and it was a favourite partly because he was formed by the experience of living in a Germany beset with violence – the turmoil following the First World War and the rise of the Nazis and partly because he had to tussle with his own experience here of being treated as an ‘enemy alien’. His life was one of coming to terms with the violence within himself occasioned by this violence meted out to him. He wanted to break the cycle of violence and this led him eventually to become a Christian and a monk because he saw and experienced in Christ a person who might do this. Something of this dynamic, in a much more attenuated way, is true for me too mediated partly through my own family’s experience of war and especially my father’s – so, if you’ll allow me, I’d like just to say something of that experience – to help perhaps understand why we are remembering the dead of the many wars which still beset us and why I as a monk perhaps have a dog in the fight after all, as the Americans say.

My father was born in 1910 and served in the Navy from 1926 until 1951, and even earlier if you count his time as a boy seaman at Greenwich from 1921. He was at sea for most of the war, escorting Arctic and Atlantic and Mediterranean convoys, was later in the South Atlantic and in the Indian and Pacific Oceans – at D Day and the surrender of Japan. As children we admired him hugely and were avid readers of anything military especially anything to do with the Second World War but he himself was extremely reticent about it. As a young man I would try and get him to tell me all about it, this war that figured so large in my imagination. And he was pleased to talk about transiting from one ship to another via the trans-Siberian railway or about being forgotten in Simonstown in South Africa for a few months with a shipmate and being given a rifle and a boat to patrol the harbour for something to do. But when it came to his time in the various theatres of war, he would go so far and then stop. He did once tell me of the deep fear they all felt below decks, or even above, all with an eye on the quickest way out, always – and of the awful job once of scraping out flesh from a turret hit by shellfire for which he and the other volunteer were allowed an extra tot of rum, but that was about it. He’d lost too many friends and seen too much violence to want to talk about it. He took that trauma with him to the grave and none of us really understood, as most of us can’t today. But we can get near it and honour those who have had this experience often forced upon them and remember them in the hope that their service will inspire us to seek peace rather than war, for everyone’s sake. So excuse my homage to my father but it’s my way of paying homage to all those who suffer through war. And it’s why we read the Beatitudes today – these impossible commands, or better, suggestions – in the hope at least that with Christ’s help, we may begin to fulfil them:

To be poor in spirit, to mourn truly, to be meek in order to let God get a word in edgeways, to hunger and thirst for what is right, to be merciful, to allow oneself to be persecuted for what is good, to be reviled and not to revile in turn, to be pure in heart, to be peacemakers.

God knows we need such virtues now more than ever.

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