

Notes on Reading Isaiah 2 verses 1 – 4 ‘Remembrance Day’

The story of the first ever British tank crew is amazing. It speaks of eight brave and courageous men who volunteered to serve in innovative technology that was as dangerous to those inside it, as it was to those outside. Let me tell you the story of one of these men: Clement Arnold.

The story of Clement Arnold

Clement Arnold was one of four brothers from a Llandudno family who volunteered to fight on the outbreak of war, three of whom served in the Tank Corps. All were commissioned, decorated, and survived the First World War.

Arnold's most notable action of the First World War came during the Battle of Amiens, a battle that marked a major turning point for the Allies on the road to victory. On the first day of the battle, 8th August 1918, Arnold was in command of his Whippet tank, 'Musical Box'. As the other tanks in their troop were knocked out, Musical Box became the lead tank. Arnold ordered his crew to drive across the German lines of fire whilst engaging the German battery with machine gun fire. They were able to cause considerable damage to the German artillery. Inevitably, the tank attracted machine-gun fire, which punctured the spare fuel cans on the roof and caused petrol to run down inside the cab. Two shells then hit the tank, causing the petrol to ignite inside the tank.

After the war, Arnold recalled:

“Petrol was running down the inside of the back door. Fumes and heat combined were very bad. I was shouting to driver Carney to turn about when the cab burst into flames. I managed to get the door open and drag out the other two men. The fresh air revived us, and we all got up and made a short rush to get away from the burning petrol. We were all on fire. We rolled over and over to try and extinguish the flames.”

On escaping from the burning tank, Arnold and his crew were met by a group of German soldiers seeking revenge for the deaths of their comrades. Arnold's driver was shot and killed, and he and his gunner were savagely attacked.

“I saw numbers of the enemy approaching from all around. The first arrival came for me with a rifle and bayonet. I got hold of this, and the point of the bayonet entered my right forearm. The second man struck at my head with the butt end of his rifle, hit my shoulder and neck, and knocked me down. When I came to, there were dozens all around me, and anyone who could reach me did so, and I was well kicked.” A German officer, Ritter Ernst von Maravic, intervened to stop the attack and saved the lives of Arnold and his gunner, Private Ribbons, both of whom were taken prisoner and sent to a POW camp in Freiburg, Germany. Arnold showed his gratitude by gifting von Maravic his watch, given to him by his father for his 21st birthday.

The two made contact again in 1931 and formed a close, unlikely friendship. During one of their visits, von Maravic returned the watch to Arnold in 1936.

Arnold was awarded the Distinguished Service Order medal for his actions in Musical Box. As I read the story myself, I wondered if perhaps it should also be a story of von Maravic and his courage he showed in stopping his men killing Arnold and Ribbens and of their later friendship when peace had come.

Courage comes in all shapes and sizes. There is the is courage of combat and there is the courage of working for peace and this is the double edge of Remembrance Day which we hold together when we wear our poppies. This double edge cuts both ways like our reading from Isaiah does. The poppy, like Isaiah 2, speaks of the hope of a true and lasting peace, but when I read Isaiah, I can't help but remember that he was a man who was called to be a prophet to Jerusalem. Then, when I think of that I can't help but think about Jerusalem today and how Israel responded to the terrorist attack by Hamas in October 2023. It is tempting to only hold one edge of our poppy as that is a relatively easy thing to do. It is tempting to either hold onto the pain of conflict or to just hope for a full and genuine peace. But we're to hold both edges together at the same time which is a difficult and demanding task to do. This is because we're forced to hold these two very different edges tight together and when we do that we are cut deep within. I know this because it was my experience when Israel was attacked and when they then invaded Gaza in retaliation.

Our poppy will not allow us to choose a black or white viewpoint. Instead, the poppy points to a far more nuanced perspective such as illustrated by Clement Arnold and Ernst von Maravic, or in my case the way of faith. Isaiah speaks in verses 3 and 4 as a Jewish prophet of the way of peace and how we can learn to walk in the paths of peace, of renewal and restoration, of respect and reconciliation. At times I wonder, what would our world look like if this was the path George Bush had chosen in 2001 after the attack on the Twin Towers? Jesus is another Jewish prophet to Jerusalem and he who spoke of loving your enemy, of turning the other cheek and praying for them because many of his fellow Jews were intent on walking the path of war which would lead to disaster. When I see the blood red of the poppy, I am reminded of the sacrifice of those who paid the ultimate price in war as well as Jesus who gave his all too. Our poppies tell us to live in such a way that their blood may not be given in vain as we seek to walk in the path of peace **and** the path of justice for all too.

This is why I wear a cross too. The cross speaks of my own being reconciled to both God and people and it speaks of God's call on me to be a means of peace, of reconciliation, of renewal and of hope like we say with Arnold and von Maravic. This is what Isaiah and what Jesus both spoke about and were about. May we all live out this message of the Poppy in our lives today.