

Dr Paula Johnson is the current president of Hillary Clinton's former university. An African-American, she gave a speech to Hillary supporters gathered for victory but learning defeat. 'Whatever the result,' she said, 'we stand for justice. We stand for equality for everyone, no matter your gender, your race, your sexual orientation or your religion, no matter what country you come from or what your immigration status is.' Here was a ringing endorsement of basic values at the heart of democracy the world over. She had to say these things because the business of basic values had been massively in the foreground of the election campaign. Basic justice; basic equality.

There are many reasons why nations have gone and continue to go to war. Sometimes it's for a land grab – sometimes for control of resources such as oil and gas – sometimes for influence in the game of geopolitics – sometimes for the sheer will to dominate. Those who enter the arena of war more for defensive reasons often talk most about values – “we want to defend our freedom, our way of life, our values.” Paula Johnson's speech was in this defensive vein, as though there was a war on, a war over values. If you ask me what's worth dying for, I suggest Paula's list of values is a reasonably good place to start.

We know, however, that the equality of genders and religions and ethnic groups has not always been supported by our British culture or our churches, and the need to champion basic rights has only become apparent in the modern period, even late in the modern period – after the 2WW in fact with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet even now, as we know, the momentum for equality is far from over. Hence the need for Paula to make her speech to a hugely demoralised crowd. The values of justice and equality – in society and in the eyes of God – is a function of the dignity of the human, and there is no religion that I know of which doesn't in some measure have the dignity of the human at its core – at least in theory, if not always in practice. Today that dignity needs extending to the non-human world of animals and the environment, lest we embrace a death-wish with runaway climate change. But for today let's stick just with the dignity of the human. And here's why :

*“... patriotism is indeed a double-edged sword. It both emboldens the blood, just as it narrows the mind. And when the drums of war have reached a fever pitch and the blood boils with hate and the mind has closed, the leader will have no need in seizing the rights of the citizenry. Rather, the citizenry, infused with fear and patriotism, will offer up all of their rights to the leader and gladly so. How do I know? For this is what I have done. And I am Julius Caesar.”*

Infuse fear and patriotism and the dictators get their way. That was ancient Rome, but there may be some contemporary relevance. I'm thinking Hitler in the 1930s and I'm thinking recent times.

I have never lived through war but in another sense my life has been lived in continuous war. It is calculated that since 1945, we will have lived through 150 conflicts the world over. Many of these seem far away, but we have been and remain involved. Because of modern communications and international connectedness, you might say that every war in a sense has become a world war. In 1948 the Lambeth Conference resolution of Anglican Bishops said, “War was unacceptable as a way of settling international disputes”. That was a high aspiration, but quite clearly, we haven't got there yet.

There are many sides to remembrance & war. So why do we remember? I suggest it is basically for 2 reasons:

- 1) we recall the human tragedy of loss through the brutality of war itself;
- 2) we commit ourselves to work for a different kind of world.

Before I say just a little about both sides of this equation I want to give you some words I came across once from an American commentator, philosopher and environmentalist. He says:

'It is hard not to doubt the effectiveness of modern war as a solution to any problem except that of exchanging one damage for another. Apologists for war will insist that war is necessary for national self-defense. But the doubter, in reply, will ask whether the cost even of a successful war of national defense — in life, money, material, foods, health, and (inevitably) freedom — may amount to a national defeat. National defense through war always involves some degree of national defeat. We know enough by now to know that you cannot damage a part of the world without damaging all of it. Modern war has made it impossible to damage your enemy without damaging yourself.'

These are challenging words. The reckoning of the 1WW has it that more than a total of 9million troops were killed but 10million civilians as well. More civilians than troops. Do we just tolerate that kind

of reckoning now? Even expect it? Will it be the same in Aleppo and Mosul? In this light, it's sobering to recall the words of Harry Patch, the last veteran of the IWW, who said before he died a couple of years ago, 'It was not worth even one life.'

The religious writer Karen Armstrong's recent book on religion and violence made a very good case that most wars through the ages have not been initiated by religion, in spite of the common assumption nowadays that religion is the biggest cause of conflict in the world. Most wars, she says, have been driven by Nationalism, with religion providing some kind of back-up in supplying a transcendent justification – the justification that 'God is on our side'. Poor God. She gets enlisted by both sides in most conflicts. She doesn't stand a chance. But blaming God is an excuse. What God really wants is for us to beat swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks, so that nations learn war no more. That was Micah's vision in the 8thC before Jesus. Fat chance of that, you might say, and if you did you could claim history to be on your side.

But what if the prophetic dream is worth pursuing? Something which might help in this pursuit is to make a distinction between Nationalism and Patriotism. There's a fine line between them, but I think there is a line. Nationalism glorifies the state and in the process, even accords it a transcendent meaning, makes it almost divine. This seems to be happening around the world right now as nations pull back behind their walls and borders. If that's what Nationalism amounts to then the religions have a duty to resist it, much as the Confessing Church in Germany did against Hitler's National Socialism, and did so in the name of the Kingdom of God and not the Kingdom of the super race. On the other hand, Patriotism, it seems to me, if it separates itself from Nationalism, appeals to a nation's conscience differently. The nation is justified in being elevated if it is prepared to celebrate certain values which reflect what I called earlier 'the dignity of the human'. A nation has a right to hold its head high if it does that. Nationalism vs Patriotism – it's worth pondering that debate on Remembrance Sunday.

So today we do 2 things, always. First, we recall the tragedy of war – all wars. It's really people, young lives, men and women, we need to have before us. In a real sense their lives were a sacrifice. The loss of husbands and sons and wives and daughters is what we remember at the end of the day. War is always brutal, degrading and dehumanising. For this reason, we remember not in order to glorify war – in the face of so much suffering we have no stomach left for that now. Even if it is fought in a believed just cause, at best war can only be a very last resort when all other options have failed, and most times we might wonder if all the options had been tried. Therefore, as we remember those who gave their lives, we do so with pathos.

The second side to remembrance is that we commit ourselves to something more worthy of our humanity and of the God who enlivens that humanity with his spirit. Our second lesson today had John's Gospel account of Jesus before Pilate, with a drama over who is the real King – Pilate (who stands in for Caesar) or Jesus (who stands in for God). Pilate did not know the truth – 'What is truth?', he asked. In other words, he failed to recognise the truth which stood before him. Jesus's words appealed to his voice: 'Everyone who listens to the truth listens to my voice' – the voice which said, 'My Kingdom is not from this world.' In other words, what Jesus stands for is a different set of values than those which inform Pilate and his Nationalist belief-system. Pilate stood for the Roman belief in peace through preparing for war. Jesus stood for peace through practising justice. A clash of values. A clash then and a clash now.

But there is one more thing to know. God does not establish values without our partnership. The Lord's prayer which asks for God's kingdom to come also asks God for forgiveness for our wrong-doing. And that includes the wrong-doing of violence, whether we consider it justified or not. So the best tribute to those who gave their lives is to create a world where no-one else has to give their lives in violence unnecessarily. Of course, this is a dream, an ideal. But it's part of Christian faith to dream dreams and to have ideals, even as we may never actually see them come about. It is a legacy of war that we do pledge ourselves to create a different world for the sake of the future, and as Christians we should also say for the sake of the glory of God – from whom all hope comes and to whom belongs all praise belongs. Amen.