

Sermon in PSLC Festival Chapel service

Saturday 30th May 2015

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From the cowardice that fears truth, from the laziness content with half-truth, and from the arrogance that believes it knows all truth, O God of truth, deliver us. Amen.

As you do during the half-term breaks, you take the family to the cinema and subject yourself to your teenage sons' choice of a film. Little did I know that in seeing the recently released Disney show 'Tomorrow Land' all of my earlier preparations for this sermon to you today would chime so well with the movie's moral message. Starring George Cluney and Hugh Laurie, it really is worth a watch if you are at all concerned about the future of this planet, if you feel some degree of sadness over the kind of world to be inherited by our grandchildren, and if, theologically, you see all of this as a kind of anthropic letting down of our end of the bargain with a God of abundance and boundless generosity who creates us in his image such that we are meant to be co-Creators with him and yet alas, in too many ways, we have become Destroyers.

Not to spoil the film for you, it is worth every ounce of our effort *now* to change what could be a dire future. We resign ourselves to the worst possible outcome if we simply take the easy way out and embrace apathy, giving up all hope and saying to each other that any attempts at change are futile.

But if we look to the lessons found in our two scripture passages this morning, and taught us by our Western history, we can remind ourselves that indeed, just as is said in the school motto of Wellington College: 'Virtutis Fortuna Comes' – Fortune favours the Brave. It's not by embracing apathy that we can do great

things, but by being brave enough to shout down the voices telling us that all is futile – so don't even bother.

A story is told of a business conference whereat the keynote speaker rose and began his talk in the Convention Centre. 'The problem with our world today', he began, 'is apathy'. A voice from the back was heard to utter, impetuously, 'Who cares?'

But we have to care. As Freemasons embracing the opportunity to fashion and build our own character with the designs and to the honour of the Great Architect in mind, as parents, as grand-parents, as fellow travellers spinning through space and time on this fragile planet earth, our island-home, we have to care, or we throw back into the face of an astronomically generous Creator-God, this creative gift we share with Him called our now and our future.

At this point, I have to remark upon an unfair eclipsing of one historical event by another. Whilst the Battle of Waterloo celebrates its 200th anniversary this year, so too does the signing at Runnymede of the Magna Carta celebrate its 800th anniversary. In 1215 King John faced the determination of those who would no longer see themselves apathetically suffering the futility of their lot under a bad monarch, but instead took action, and changed the course of human history by forcing the King to sign the antecedent to the Bill of Rights.

With all of these significant dates in mind, 2016, just next year, is of course the 100 Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme – that mindless and possibly pointless conflagration in which such a stunningly large number of Old Wellingtonians lost their lives, and in whose memory the Lutyan's Memorial stands in this Chapel, with the inscription at the base seen on every such monument, as proscribed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

under the direction of Rudyard Kipling, words from our reading from Sirach today, 'Their name liveth forevermore.'

So, indeed, as we also heard read from the Book of Sirach, 'Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations.' For 'these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten; their wealth will remain with their descendants, and their inheritance with their children's children.'

Our ancestors who gave their today for our tomorrow took to heart both our own and another version, really, of the Wellington College motto: 'Fortune favours the brave.' What about the motto of the British Special Air Service (the SAS) 'Who dares wins'. Notably, current Old Wellingtonian connections are official secrets but Richard Williams (a boarder in the Picton from 1980-84) was Commanding Officer from 2005 to 2008 and was awarded the Military Cross whilst leading his Squadron on offensive operations in Afghanistan in 2001.

Fortune favours the brave. Who dares wins.

The first of these famous men of note I wish to offer to you this morning, who offered such selfless bravery and about whom history honours with such good memory, is the very first Christian martyr and saint – Stephen. His courageous act of testimony he offered selflessly in the face of such odds. A raging crowd murdering him with stones were blessed with his forgiveness even as he testified to the power and truth of the Holy Spirit. Countless other contemporaneous and future martyrs were then inspired to emulate his example and to keep the Christian message of hope and forgiveness alive during a time of deep persecution in the Church's history. It's interesting to note that today, once again, the Christian church worldwide, is the most persecuted faith in the world.

Leaving the history of the church, and now turning to the military, one outstanding example of bravery from the Battle of Waterloo came from Lord Uxbridge, who later became 1st Marquess of Anglesey. He had eight or nine horses shot from under him, before one of the last cannon shots fired on 18 June 1815 hit his right leg, leading to its amputation above the knee. As the story goes, he was close to the Duke of Wellington when he was hit, and is reputed to have said, "By God, sir, I've lost my leg!", to which Wellington replied "By God, sir, so you have!" Lord Uxbridge, time after time, refused to succumb to the spirit of apathy, and even in the face of such odds that most men would have quickly determined all courageous efforts to be futile at best, he literally soldiered on.

And 100 years after the Battle of Waterloo, and 100 years ago from today, we find this example in dispatches, about an Old Wellingtonian in the prime of his youth killed on the Battlefields of France:

V.C. SECOND LIEUTENANT ALEXANDER BULLER TURNER, 3rd Royal Berks Regiment (att. 1st Bn.) died on October 1st of a wound received on September 23rd. He was in the Hopetoun 1906—1908. He was gazetted to the Royal Berks in August 1914, and went out to the front in June 1915. A captain of the 1st Batt. spoke of him as the bravest of the brave. He had been previously wounded in the head, and had only recently returned to the front. His C.O. writes: "During the latter part of the attack your son did one of the bravest acts I have ever seen. Single-handed he bombed back for over 150 yards a body of Germans who were bombing down a communicating trench, thereby relieving the

pressure on that flank. It was while performing this very gallant act that he received a rifle bullet wound in the abdomen." He was awarded the V.C. for his gallantry.

An historian further commented: "For most conspicuous bravery, at "Fosse 8," near Vermelles. When the regimental bombers could make no headway in Slag Alley, Second Lieutenant Turner volunteered to lead a new bombing attack. He pressed down the communication trench practically alone, throwing bombs incessantly with such dash and determination that he drove back the Germans about 150 yards without a check. His action enabled the reserves to advance with very little loss, and subsequently covered the flank of his regiment in its retirement, thus probably averting a loss of some hundreds of men. This most gallant Officer has since died of wounds received in this action."

And of course it's not just scriptural or military figures who can commit to such acts of bravery. What of a young 17 year old Pakistani girl, the same age as many of those we teach here, who in 2012 in the face of Taliban who attempted to kill

her, spoke out for girls' education. Malala Yousafzai, is the youngest ever winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Indeed, as celebratory posters in her honour say: 'One child, one teacher, one book, one pen, can change the world.'

Perhaps this is all best said in the poem, 'Ode On The Death Of The Duke of Wellington' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson: "**The path of duty was the way to glory :**

He that walks it, only thirsting For the right,

and learns to deaden Love of self, before his journey closes,

He shall find the stubborn thistle bursting into glossy purples, which out-redden
All voluptuous garden-roses".

With so many magnificent examples now in mind, and knowing that there are countless and faceless others whose selfless acts of bravery were combined with a refusal to succumb to apathy, yet are unknown to the history books, how dare any of us fail to do all that we can now, to ensure a better future tomorrow?

As we celebrate this Festival together today, let there be an underlying and undoubtable sounding bass note of hope that we are not condemned to a grim future, that all our brave little acts of greatness, alone or combined, are not futile, and instead may we remember today the Ancient Greek proverb: 'a society grows when old men plant trees whose shade they know they will never sit in.'

And to that I say, and I hope in your hearts you will join me, AMEN.