

Too young to have any real links with the second world war, my single memory of that conflict was one of the saddest of my childhood. For I so remember how, every weekday, at about three in the afternoon, just as I was coming home from school, an older lady would meet the red Eastern Counties bus on the corner of Mingle Lane and Hinton Way. Every day she expected her son home from the war. Every day, she turned away disappointed. She had never accepted his death and never would.

Just one story; one family, a very long time ago. Certainly people of my generation never expected that, at the beginning of the 21st century, our newspapers and TVs would be showing us - on an almost daily basis - the cortèges which pass through Wootton Bassett as yet one more coffin is brought back from Afghanistan.

And we wonder. We wonder what had been going through the minds of the often very young service personnel in the moments before they were blown up by roadside bombs or shot by invisible marksmen, out in a part of the world we would be had pressed to place with any accuracy on a map. What kind of terror do they put up with, day in, day out? For the truth is that our troops in the Sangin pocket in Afghanistan have been exposed to the exchange of fire, daily, for well over a month - far longer than any infantry battalions on the western front in the First World War.

Because this campaign is so far away, I wonder if any of us can really imagine what this war is like? We may recall seeing films of Prince William kicking a football around in a safe camp; but do we have the imagination to really consider what courage, service and sacrifice really feels like out there? Can we, in a society which is determined to take absolutely no physical risks at all, imagine how it is that some of our soldiers are willing to rush out without covering fire to help their wounded comrades who are injured and unable to return to their lines?

Can we feel with them their incredulity when the land rovers they drive are inadequately armoured, or there are too few helicopters to avoid having to take unnecessary risks in basic transport operations?

The fact is, according to the Daily Telegraph, that British troops serving in Helmand Province, stand a 1:45 chance of being killed. Lt Col Joe Sullivan estimated that when the Paras were sustaining their heaviest losses recently, 1:58 would be killed or seriously wounded. Those statistics alone should make us reflect on the courage of so many of our fighting troop at this time – courage being the ability to do something which would otherwise be too frightening, with the strength required to overcome either pain or grief – or both. I suspect that degree of courage is something that few of us possess in any great quantity.

So are our troops appreciated? This is a hard question because I am sure we all feel a great deal of pride in them as people, and in the job they are doing against all the odds.

At least, when we think about it.

For this war is not like other conventional war. In the Falklands or in the various Bosnian conflicts we were attempting to repel an aggressive force and restore peace and harmony. There is very little evidence in Afghanistan that we can achieve anything like that; or even that it will prevent terrorist strikes in the UK which seem to be more likely to be initiated by Al Qaeda in Pakistan than by the Taliban further east. As with the 2nd Iraq war, there is massive debate about the justification for sending our troops in. So should we just pull out now and save the lives of our soldiers?

If the call is being made just because of the loss of life, I am not sure that would be a just cause to withdraw. A soldier knows that when he or she is on active service, the risk of death is something that has to be faced. When our forces landed in Normandy in 1944, there was a universal acceptance that, come what may, that campaign had to be fought. The crosses on the front of your service sheet today are testimony to those who did not survive, sixty five years ago.

But today, in an generation where heroism and stories of dashing bravery and courage are not popular with our young people, where our politics about our overseas wars are by no means clear-cut and where we do not feel able to spend the sums of money some think necessary to give our soldiers the protection they need, our Remembrance Sunday – with its time honoured two minutes silence – could feel a bit hollow. There they are, putting their lives on the line, and we can't be sure how we feel about the work they are doing

– until the numbers of deaths forces us to feel that the whole thing is just an unfolding tragedy that we can do nothing to stop.

And all this is made even more difficult by the words of today's Gospel: *You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist an evil doer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Is this not just outright pacifism?*

Or is this a demand that we don't just let the army do our dirty work for us, out of sight and out of mind, but that we actually engage with the political and social issues of the people of Afghanistan because, far away as they are, they are as entitled to our love as those who live next door to us? That the people who are hoping that we can enable their daughters to go to school and their wives to be able to work in the professions are not just relying on military force to achieve these things, but that the popular mind of the citizens of the UK actually cares about the quality of life of the average Afghani?

If we can walk that extra mile, I believe we will be transforming Remembrance Sunday. No longer will it be just a sad reflection on the awful loss of life; it will also be an opportunity for us to give thanks for the troops who have laid down their lives trying to establish true justice and peace in a part of the world which would have no chance of it otherwise. And that, it seems to me, is true valour - and the fulfilling of Isaiah's prophecy, for by the sacrifice of us all *the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.*