

St Nicolas Church, (Anglican), Cranleigh, 9 November 2025

Remembrance Sunday: A Critical Theological Reflection by Jason Strange.

Introduction

Cranleigh claims to be the largest village in England. The railway and station were removed in 1968, subsequently imposing an isolated feel where community self-sufficiency influences socio-economic cohesion. Served by Anglican, Baptist and Catholic Churches, all of whom laid memorial wreaths, St Nicolas Church received the armed and civic representatives, complementing traditional remembrance symbols such as poppies and vestments, synonymous with orthodoxy.

Therefore, this critical reflection aims to explore how an Anglican worship service enacts theology that proports to balance solemn Remembrance of the fallen with penitence, justice, peace and Christian hope in the face of suffering. By following the order of the service for ease, I seek to purge the theological prerogatives:

Processional Hymn

‘All My Hope on God is Founded’ is originally a German hymn. Translated into English in 1899 it remains an ironic choice, yet by the end of verse one, we are assured that it is God, “he alone...*(that)*, Calls my heart to be his own.” The theology is unequivocal concerning a sovereign God over all nations and transcends “sword and crown”, regardless of mistrust harboured towards former enemies. Shelton observes how to arrive at a trusting heart: “One faulty assumption that arises out of an exclusively penal view of atonement is the view that righteousness is a moral quality rather than a relationship” (2006, p.195). Therefore, if the pathway from battlefield to righteousness is divinely led, I subsequently considered the Church’s relationship with community stakeholders.

For example, ponder the processional hymn in which the colours of the Armed Forces, Cub Scouts, Girl Guides, Local Schools, Freemasons, the British Legion, et al, are brought to the altar. At first, I recognised I am an endearing devotee of pageantry and flags. However, their proximity to Christ’s altar remains problematic. I internalised, should we perpetuate the myth that legacy emblems entitle continued divine protection? Arguably, these institutions have long since jettisoned their sacred links in favour of religious pluralism, woke and DEI. Anxieties also persist concerning incompatibility with Freemasonry, yet their procession remains permitted.

While resonating with national loss and the hymn’s call to the heart and good relations, I conceded that symbols placed at the altar, out of covenant with Christ, remain vulnerable to judgment. For example, I recall the outstretched hand that dared to steady the Ark of the Covenant (1 Chr 13:10), a well-intentioned act that ended in death, unless altars today are merely perfunctory.

Sentences and Sharing of the Peace

The Anglican Church maintains the auspices of the Peace, which curiously costs little to keep in its liturgy. However, its Christological foundations appear rooted in costly discipleship. Jones is resolute in defining the cost of true peace:

We are called to imitate Christ in suffering...because God has defeated suffering and death in the resurrection of Christ. The costly discipleship is not something we achieve...is not about moralism...it is because Christ also suffered...that we are able to follow his example (2014, p.139).

Sharing the Peace sometimes feels uncomfortable, slightly repressed. Yet I was reminded that without Christ's example, I am unable to exchange articles of peace in this post-nationalist age. It is a small price to pay in contrast to those who paid the ultimate price.

Prayers of Penitence

The service included prayers to amend communal and individual wrongdoing yet was devoid of true repentance. Again, Shelton supports the context of "...biblical covenant, forgiveness and covenant righteousness...based on God's grace in response to repentance and obedience" (2006, p.197). The request was made for healing and forgiveness, yet I felt contrition was absent. Suppose that recurring remembrance services re-subject congregations to secondary trauma? The call to God to heal all memories is acute, particularly for those suffering from conflict-induced PTSD, but these prayers seemed mislabelled.

First Reading: Psalm 46, followed by Hymn, '*Our God, our help in ages past*'

The Psalm is ascribed to the sons of Korah, for the choir director. Divided into three sections signifying, "God is our refuge and strength..." (KJV). Next came the Hymn, which paraphrases Psalm 90 and evoked sobriety that if God is God at all, he must be sizeable, not allegiant to any one denomination or nation. In verse 2, "Beneath the shadow of thy throne, thy saints have dwelt secure," speaks not of a God who is taciturn or disengaged from humanity, but one who is amid our conflicts. Zacharias recognises that incarnation and embodiment of the Godhead resonates with believers' genuine desire for relational security, to the expulsion of all others - in a "world that convulses with fractured kinships" (1994, p.176). Poignantly, this hymn was the last sung onboard the Titanic the day it sank, with the loss of over 1500 souls, still in our nation's consciousness. I questioned whether the same protections apply to our legacy Christian nation, in which our armed forces currently appear impotent against existential threats, and disasters incur such massive loss of life. Interestingly, the 2nd reading from Romans 12:17-21, in which Paul teaches, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil...It is mine to avenge..." offered some divine reassurance, despite the strength of the British army.

Hymn - '*Make me a channel of your peace*'

We sang the most well-known hymn version of the '*Prayer of St. Francis*', adapted and set to a chant-like melody from 1967. Its setting within a service that remembers war losses felt strange. The premise that we put down our weapons to emulate peace envoys, felt as disconcerting as the chant. But if perplexed, Cocksworth advises that core doctrines of the

church “...develop out of a context and community of prayer; and prayer enacts, embodies and renders visible these doctrines in the life of the community” (2018, pp. 2-3). Therefore, if successful in this endeavour, the hymn’s chorus promises to be better understood by those we mutually love. However, this theology presents inconsistent with the very sacrifices of war dead. The curate tried unconvincingly to address evil as an entity that lurks. Indeed, Swinton notes that “The root causes of radical evil are always complex...on a political level: the perpetrators always think that they are right!” (2022, p.63). Irrespective, soldiers in the trenches displayed extraordinary bravery and sacrifice, exemplars that model what should be good within us. Therefore, I deduced that, as per the reading from Romans, the theology is not just about mourning the dead but calls for action. The passage embodies an active theology of peace-making, though not necessarily outright pacifism, which is a diverse view within Anglicanism.

Choir: ‘*They shall grow not old*’ (Laurence Binyon; music by Jenny Thorne)

It was a beautiful rendition which afforded a moment of serenity. (Michael Clarke, Director of Music, is unimpeachable). Sometimes, Anglican theological formation relies on poetry, lamentations and memories. Bray makes several observations that Binyon would have recognised.

When it was over, the entire nation breathed a collective sigh of relief, but there could be no going back to the innocent pre-war time. New demons had been unleashed. Men rushed to enlist; many of them persuaded by the strange belief that blood sacrifice was somehow going to cleanse...the decadence of their society (2021, p.550).

But history has shown it is the *other* blood sacrifice, our saviour’s atonement, that endures, enabling these men not to grow old, either in state or perpetuity. I really appreciated the autonomy to think these things through for myself, rather than singing yet another prescribed hymn.

The Prayers, including The Lord’s Prayer, Commitment to work for Peace

The prayers included pleas for the wounded, the grieving, the homeless, and even our enemies. They demonstrated a theology where God is not an impassive observer but one who suffers with humanity. There was one mention of the Spirit of God as *agency that* enables us to walk in the ways or paths of peace, but sparse mention of Jesus.

Final Hymn ‘*Guide me, O thou great Redeemer*’

Initially written by William Williams as, ‘*Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*’, (The United Methodist Hymnal, No. 127), the change from ‘Jehovah’ to ‘Redeemer’ reflects a theological and cultural shift. Since its first publication in 1762, preferences for using titles or attributes of God have shifted toward those focused on redeeming humanity. There isn’t a single specific event or date associated with this change. However, during the 1920s, monuments would spring up across our nation, etching a powerful redemption narrative into culture that persists to this day. Kraft observes, “The power that keeps people following the script of their culture is the power of habit, not any power that culture possesses in itself” (1989, p.56). For the

script to work, there must be a cross-like meaning. The dead now became the 'Glorious dead', offering notional hope that God was somehow always present, despite the catastrophe.

The National Anthem

Traditionally, the National Anthem is sung just before the dismissal and blessing, yet reformists argue that a monarchist, militarist and nationalist song has no place within an act of Christian worship. Publications in 2025 by Professor Betz suggest civil unrest is imminent, including the deposition of elites and the monarchy, which, given religious pluralism and diversity, are presumed indicators.

In Conclusion

The service was framed with Christian hope. Prayers commend the departed to God's safekeeping while hymns recognise God's sovereignty over all human conflict. Although the psalms and prayers demanded peacekeeping by all, the service refused to insist on repentance as an antidote. The service was a liturgical act of remembrance in God's presence and a challenge to the living not to forget the cost of war.

However, given everyday community reticence towards God (prayers in assembly were once a thing), the mutating political landscape, eroding our once palpable national and Christian borders and restricting God to an annual state visit – this tokenism might well be comparable with Bray's line on decadence, that immediately preceded the Great War.

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