

Worcester Cathedral
Remembrance Sunday
Requiem Eucharist, 10 November 2024

Most holy God and Father, help us, who today remember the cost of war.

These words will be said by the precentor as the prayers of the faithful are gathered up and offered to God. Today we remember the cost of war. Our remembrance is, of course, about the human cost, the cost of lives suffered, maimed, changed, and lost; the cost of violence and death both in time of war and in the years afterwards. But what too of the financial cost of war?

This morning's news on Radio 4 contained information about the shocking financial cost of the current war in Ukraine. Russia is spending 40% of public expenditure on defence and security – that is more than it spends on education and health combined. It is not just a shocking statement to read out, but it is obscene and sinful and should be named as such.

After hearing this figure I searched online for a price list of weaponry: I know nothing about weapons or the terminology or the power of each one but it becomes clear, very quickly that even the smallest missile costs tens of thousands and many are in the quarter to half a million bracket. Billions of pounds spent on destruction, violence and suffering.

Of course, the cost is absorbed by governments because it is the cost of defence in the modern world – defending its people is at the heart of every government's mandate. The percentage of GDP spent on its military is a subject which we shall no doubt hear more about in coming years. I do not wish to explore defence spending now – either in its detail or even in its morality, but the cost of war is something which is millions, billions, trillions. Imagine what might be done in a different world order with such vast amounts of cash?

It would be naïve to challenge such spending from the pulpit during a sermon, but the cost of war must surely weigh heavy on our hearts if we are to think not only of the suffering and death, but also the cost of rebuilding, reconstructing vast swathes of the Middle East, Ukraine, and countless war zones across the globe. Who pays? what is the cost of war?

The complexity of geopolitics is such that no sermon, no address, nor it seems any global summit, can solve once and for all the human propensity to fall into violent conflict and war. But as Christians we cannot remain indifferent to the wars and conflicts which rage across the earth. The facts and figures can be overwhelming and we become detached but we are here, gathering around a table where Christ invites us to share in his life and to follow him, and when we follow him we are duty bound, through love, to see him in every man and woman and child.

That cost of war in financing weaponry and destruction is huge, but it is beyond price when it comes to the human cost of suffering and death. War is so often an expenditure of life and also a cheapening of humanity. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy spoke of the cheapness of life and the indifference of humanity in one of his great poems and it is with his words that I conclude:

When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree.
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham they simply passed Him by.
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

And still it rained the wintry rain that drenched Him through and
through;
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

Stephen Edwards
Dean