



Remembrance Sunday Evensong 11 November 2018

The Invictus Games have caught our imagination. The brainchild of Prince Harry, their fourth meeting was held in Sydney just last month with much post wedding media attention. The Games were first held in September 2014 in London and are linked to the charity *Help the Heroes*. They are unique in that they are the only multi-sport event for wounded, injured or sick armed force personnel and their associated veterans. 18 countries competed in Sydney over 11 events from basketball and tennis to athletics and swimming. Already the 2020 Games are being planned to be held in the Netherlands.

The stories of some of these athletes is inspiring. They are each still on active service battling with the personal consequences of their service to their country. For all of them and their families, life will never be the same. Paul Guest, for example, hit the headlines when he was competing in the wheelchair tennis doubles and a helicopter buzzed overhead. Paul had been in active service during the Northern Ireland Troubles but was discharged with his injuries and later diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. That helicopter triggered a severe moment of anxiety and it took his doubles partner and the song *Let It Go* from the Walt Disney film *Frozen* to restore his equilibrium so that the match could continue.

The Invictus competitors wear T shirts with the words *I am* written on their backs, two simple words that inspire respect and admiration at the determination and courage of all those who rise above the burdens of disfigurement or disability. Those words *I am* are also on their chests highlighted in a line taken from the famous poem entitled *Invictus* that also inspired these Games. The line on their T shirts reads *I am the Captain of my Soul* and to it the poem adds *I am the Master of my Fate*. We are each the master and captain of our ultimate destination even if not the lives and circumstances that come our way on our journey there. But the Invictus athletes show us that achievements that come with courage can be beyond

our individual natural capacity with the additional ingredient from team comradery that fosters self-respect and self-determination.

For those of the Jewish and Christian faiths those simple words *I am* also remind us that we are not alone in our battles of life. The God of Jacob that we heard speaking through the prophet Micah in our reading was known to the people of those Old Testament times as Jehovah, the great *I am*, the holiest untouchable God who reached down from the heavens and spoke through the prophets. Micah who recorded those verses lifts our sights to look to a future kingdom of God where nation will not rise up against nation neither will they learn war any more but they will sit in peace, ploughing and pruning to provide rather than wielding the sword and spear to destroy. The great *I am* working in the world through the whole of creation, promoting peace and concord, the assurance that we can stand confident of the eternal plan of the great *I am*. Our fate and our souls are safe with the great *I am* of history.

The poem *Invictus* was written back in 1875 by an English poet William Ernest Henley and Henley knew what it was to battle in life. At the age of just 16 years old, one of his legs required amputation due to complications arising from tuberculosis. Then after seeking treatment for problems with his other leg he was told it would require a similar procedure. Instead in August 1873 he travelled to Edinburgh where a distinguished surgeon Joseph Lister saved the remaining leg but not before multiple surgical interventions on the foot. While recovering in the infirmary Henley was moved to write the verses that became "*Invictus*", a memorable evocation of self-mastery and fortitude in adversity, traits worthy of the finest of battle worn soldiers of life:

1. Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

2. In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

3. Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

4. It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

Henley's faith shines through his poetry and inspires peoples of all faiths and none. His poem has inspired many down the years including Winston Churchill who served for a time on the western front during WW1 and used it in 1941 during WW2, and Nelson Mandela who recited it to fellow prisoners on Robben Island. Indeed, President Obama read the last verse in his memorial address for Mandela in 2013. Then the Daily Mirror headlined the words "Bloody but unbowed" as it reported the July 2005 London bombings.

But it took some years before its title was decided. Originally it was variously given the titles "Myself", "Song of the Strong Soul", "My Soul", "Clear Grit", "Master of His Fate" and "Captain of My Soul". All point to its message for self-respect and self-determination, self-mastery, courage, resolve and fortitude in the face of adversity. It was the editor in 1900 of the Oxford Book of English Verse, one Arthur Quiller-Couch who took the trouble to ponder its underlying theme. In the darkness of the battles of life the war warrior stands courageous and remains unconquered.

So *Invictus*, the Latin for Unconquered it's title has become ever since and hidden within its verses is the assurance that in treading the straight path and narrow gate that God's son, Christ himself followed as his head was bloodied but unbowed we shall be carried by the great *I am* to claim those words for ourselves. Henley reminds us of a God of mercy who speaks through the horror, the anger and the tears that we still feel today still even a hundred years after the Great War of all Wars.

Our nation is not alone in remembering today in ceremonies like our own this afternoon the tragedy of humanity, the hell of the mud and trenches, the futility of war. WW1 spawned many poets and writers, musicians and artists who endeavoured to give voice to our anguish. The poet soldier Wilfred Owen who was killed near the end of the war called it "*the pity of war*" and TS Elliot notably entitled his lament *The Wasteland*. WW1 profoundly shaped our country and 100 years later its remembrance remains intensely sobering and not just for those who lost loved ones. Armistice Sunday, our poppies, our Remembrance ceremonies, our Ode of Remembrance, the national Cenotaph monument the focus of our national remembrance each year, the Christmas truce, women in the workplace, the RAF in its current form, the tank, sniper and worse ... gas and chemical warfare all came about in the first world war. On a lighter note we affectionately remember wartime songs that held comrades together and slang such as *Over the Top, Blighty, Bumf and Shrapnel*. Yes, even Jelly Babies were first produced as Peace Babies in 1918 to celebrate the end of WW1 and this year has seen a limited edition in aid of Help the Heroes.

It was an intense four years and 3 months of which our silhouette soldier by the war memorial in the cathedral is a poignant reminder of its cost on a generation of men. Young men like James Finn from Bodmin posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for gallantry at Ypres. So many young offered their lives in the service of their country but even they were too exhausted to celebrate at its end. Approaching a million were killed across the British Empire and 1 ½ mn were left unable to work. We have marked the enormous loss of life through our poppy drop today and by giving thanks each day in this cathedral for each of the Cornish fallen by name on the anniversary of their deaths. Across Europe and beyond many have been brought together across political and national divides at ceremonies that have been a timely reminder of our common humanity. Like them we have already echoed in this service the much used words Lawrence Binyon famously wrote in 1914 from the north Cornwall cliffs so "*We will remember them*".

Today we are humbled to honour all the Unconquered, who captain their souls and master their fate who continue to be peacemakers and peacekeepers on our behalf, and like Olaf Schmidt who was a chorister at this cathedral and posthumously awarded the George Cross continue to pay the ultimate price.

For *"peace is not the absence of war"* as Albert Einstein said. I want to leave the last word to a WW1 Army chaplain George Studdert Kennedy known affectionately as Woodbine Willie to the troops, and who brought God's comfort to the mud, suffering and death of the trenches with his Woodbine cigarettes and his own faith and poetry. Like us at times, many wartime poets find themselves questioning *"Where is God?"* and Kennedy points to the path trodden by the one who speaks into the darkness: *"Blessed are the Peacemakers"*.

Still I see them coming, coming,
In their ragged broken line,
Walking wounded in the sunlight,
Clothed in majesty divine.

Tattered and torn and bloody khaki,
Gleams of white flesh in the sun,
Raiment worthy of their beauty,
And the great things they have done.
Purple robes and snowy linen
Have for earthly kings sufficed,
But these bloody sweaty tatters
Were the robes of Jesus Christ.

Jehovah who paid the price of becoming man exhorts all soldiers of life to tread in the confidence of the great *I am* along the straight path of the one who too has suffered the wounds and who bears with us the cost of service whether in peacetime or war, in communities, among neighbours, in public service or for nations.

Canon Lynda Barley
Canon Pastor

Reference: Micah 4: 1-5