

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY 2021

Saint Martin Soldier and Saint

S. Michael & All Angels, Barnes

SAINT MARTIN THE SOLDIER SAINT

When the Armistice was signed in 1918,
many in France saw something more than coincidence,
that 11th November is also the feast of Saint Martin,
soldier turned monk and later bishop of Tours.

Born of pagan parents in the early 4th century,
but interested in his youth in the Christian faith,
he was from a military family and became a soldier.
We are not quite sure when he was baptised,
but he continued to serve as a soldier for some time
before he left the army for another life as a monk.

MILITARY LANGUAGE IN SCRIPTURE

Because of his background, I'm sure the military language of the New Testament would
have struck Martin, and perhaps even attracted him to the Christian faith.
Saint Paul writes of the breastplate of faith, and the helmet of salvation,
as he conscripts military imagery in the service of the Gospel, recasting it in spiritual terms.
And our patron of this church – Saint Michael – is expressly a military figure,
depicted wearing armour and carrying a sword.

Many people today feel uncomfortable about this Christian use of military language and
imagery - few of us can sing the hymn 'Onward Christian soldiers' without a sense of
awkwardness.

After all, don't we call Christ the Prince of peace,
Aren't Christians called to be peacemakers,
Don't we pray for the peace of the world?
So what place can there be for such militaristic imagery and language?

IDEALISM AND REALISM

But the Christian faith is both idealistic and realistic

It is idealistic in that it holds before us a vision of a world where there is no more war any
more – where swords are repurposed into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks –
the instruments of death becoming the tools of growth and life.

But it is also realistic, reminding us that we live in a fallen, broken and sinful world where
there is hatred, violence, folly and suffering; and where the evil of war is an inescapable
fact, but in the midst of which we may discover virtues of sacrifice, courage and love.

INHABITING TENSION

The Christian faith honestly recognises the world as it is while also desiring it to be different. and Martin the Christian soldier-saint inhabited this uncomfortable place of tension, the gap between how things are and how they should be.

Many of you will know the famous story in which Martin encounters a beggar on a cold winter's day and divides his cloak in two so that both might be clothed – closing the gap between the world as it is and as it should be.

Ultimately, his decision to leave the army and become a monk was motivated by a desire that close that gap between the real and the ideal.

This gap between what is and what should be, has been very obvious during COP26; and we have seen the first signs of tension between developed and developing nations, between the main agents of climate change and those most likely to be worst affected by it.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICT

In the past, war was mostly about territory or ideology, but in his book 'A life on our planet', David Attenborough predicts that in the decades ahead, wars will mostly be fought over increasingly scarce resources.

As temperatures increase, crops fail, and large areas become inhospitable, so millions of people will be on the move. He writes:

'Those parts of the world with a climate still relatively mild will be put under excessive pressure to accept this human traffic; inevitably borders will be shut and conflicts will erupt globally'

DIVIDING HIS CLOAK AND SHARING RESOURCES

In light of this prediction, the famous story of Martin, dividing his cloak, takes on a new significance.

It speaks of a sharing of resources in a world of greater scarcity, of a compassionate and generous response to those most affected by climate change, to mitigate its worst effects on people's lives.

But the stark truth is this - preventing climate change in the first place, is almost certainly the most important thing we can do to prevent war and ensure peace in our world.

THE VICTORY OF CHRIST AND THE PEACE OF GOD

Ultimately, Martin left his life as a soldier, becoming a monk and later (against his will) a bishop.

Our broken world sometimes still needs soldiers, but is also needs just as much, if not even more, people like Saint Martin who as a soldier of Christ, witnessed to a better reality of a world transformed by the love of Christ, who died that people of every tribe and tongue and nation may be at peace with God and one another. Saints who by their lives inspire us to lives of heroic virtue and sacrifice, that we might close the gap between what is and what should be and making real to us the victory of Christ and the peace of God.