Sermon preached by The Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, the Most Rev Dr Richard Clarke, at the Royal Irish Regiment's Annual Service of Remembrance in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast on Sunday November 4 2018.

It is a genuine privilege to have been invited to preach at this service. The Royal Irish Regiment, in itself and its antecedents has a distinguished history that stretches back to the late seventeenth century. And the regimental motto, "Clear the Way" – in the Irish of today, "Fág an Bealach" – has its origins, we believe, in the Peninsular War of the early nineteenth century. It is indeed a long and celebrated history, which in recent weeks has been augmented further by the presentation of new colours here in Belfast to the First and Second Battalions of the Regiment.

But the Regiment's motto, "Fág an Ballach" – "Clear the way", has of course very clear resonances within the Scriptures, notably the call of the prophet Isaiah to "make straight the way of the Lord", to open up God's highway even in the most unpromising of circumstances. It is a theme which was emphasised in a different mode in the first of our readings this afternoon. The prophet Micah called out for swords to be turned into the blades of ploughs and spears into pruning hooks, as indeed did Isaiah himself, and in identical words. The theme here is of the materiel for war now being given a new purpose, as war itself becomes redundant, as the way is being cleared for peace, for cultivation (the use of ploughs and pruning hooks) and for growth. This was the honest hope of many who volunteered to fight in the First World War, that this was a war that would destroy war for all time.

Although it is next Sunday that marks the centenary of the conclusion of that War, today – 4th November – marks another centenary, for some of us a highly significant one, albeit one also intimately connected with the War. A young British officer was killed in action as he led a group of soldiers crossing the Sambre-à-l'Oise canal in northern France in one of the last actions of the War. His death occurred exactly one week (almost to the hour) before the Armistice came into effect. It was on 11th November as church bells were ringing out in celebration of the ending of the war that his parents in Shrewsbury learnt that their son had been killed a week earlier. His name was Wilfred Owen, for many of us the greatest of all the poets of the Great War.

Owen's most important contribution, not simply to poetry but to our understanding of war even one hundred years later, was his determination that humans should never lose their humanity, regardless of the dreadfulness of their circumstances, even in the mud and terror of war that he was experiencing at first-hand.

In one of his late poems, 'Insensibility', published after his death, Owen begins by suggesting that those who apparently have no feelings either for themselves or for others are the fortunate ones, the happy ones among the troops. But then, in the last verse of the poem, the poet suddenly rails against them – "Cursed are the dullards whom no cannon stuns, that they should be as stones", and he continues on,

> By choice they made themselves immune
> To pity and whatever moans in man.

Becoming immune to pity – pity for whoever needs pity, whoever that may be – can be the greatest casualty of war and Wilfred Owen, who chose to go back to the front in the summer of 1918 even though (perfectly legitimately) he could have remained in England on sick leave, could see that more clearly than most. In what was, in every sense one of the most haunting of all Owen's poems, 'Strange Meeting', a soldier narrates of how he believed he had escaped from battle but then realises that he is in fact dead, and then somehow he encounters an enemy soldier whom he had killed the day before. There is no anger, no

recrimination, but as the poem comes to a conclusion, the soldier that the narrator had killed says softly, “I am the enemy you killed, my friend.” Humanity must surely never be vanquished.

But “clearing the way”, in biblical terms, is not simply about retaining our humanity even in the most terrible of circumstances, in the horrors, deprivations and torments of violence. It takes us further. It is also about clearing the way for a future that is better than what we wish to leave behind. In our second reading, from the Book of Revelation, a vision for the future was unfolded. As the writer explains, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” And so, in these days, as our focus is on remembering and commemorating the conclusion of World War I, we are reminded that the Christian call to remembrance is never just about just reminding ourselves how things have come to be as they are. It is also a pointing to a future that could be different if we would only work with God, who is the Lord not only of the past or even of the present, but also of the future.

This means taking our remembering and our honouring with us into the future, and living in the light and the strength of this remembering, not putting it to one side, but making it part of our future, but always our future in Christ.

And our future hope with Christ is ultimately about his peace – the turning of swords and spears into instruments for cultivation. This peace of God in Christ is not about the total absence of all is horrible and evil, it is not even about being free from trouble in our own lives, but rather about the living presence of goodness, the living presence of humanity (as Wilfred Owen reminds us) the living presence of love, in short the living presence of Jesus Christ in a life of spiritual growing that leads us all to a wholeness of life. Christian peace, biblical peace, is about the living presence of unequivocal goodness and of a clear integrity, not simply the absence of what is malicious and destructive.

“Clear the way” has of course a distinctive military meaning – removing whatever is obstructing an advance. But it has, as I have suggested, a spiritual dimension as well. Clearing from ourselves all that stands between us and the life that we could live, the life that allows us to reach our full potential, our full stature – as the Scriptures put it – as children of God. It is surely only in the light of knowing that we are, each one of us, loved totally by God in Christ that you and I can ever hope to reach to the full capacity to which God calls us, to love and care for all those we encounter.

It is only in that light of knowing that each human person is loved by God in life and in death, that we are able to give to those whom we remember today and celebrate today their true value and their supreme dignity.