

(I am indebted to my neighbour and colleague Susan Macdonald for mentioning this week Pericles and his funeral oration in connection with Remembrance Day)

Pericles (whose name Περικλῆς meant “surrounded by glory”) was a prominent and influential statesman, orator and general of Athens during the city’s Golden Age around the time of the Persian and the Peloponnesian Wars.

The thing we all learned about from this period at school, of course, was the Battle of Marathon which took place in 490BC. This battle was between the Persians and took place because King Darius 1 of Persia was attempting to take over Greece.

And most famously there was a legendary, but inaccurate version of events - a myth which had a young Athenian called Pheidippides running from Marathon to Athens after the battle, to announce the Greek victory with the word "Nenikēkamen!" (Νενικήκαμεν (We were victorious!)), whereupon he promptly died of exhaustion.¹

The battle, though, was also remarkable for the numbers involved. The historian Herodotus records that 6,400 Persian bodies were counted on the battlefield, and it is unknown how many more perished in the swamps. The Athenians lost 192 men, and their allies 11.²

Our interest today is in the famous Funeral Oration over the Athenian dead given by Pericles – famous chiefly because it is seen as a piece of rhetorical genius. Let me quote a little from what he had to say as the crowds gathered round the burial place:

“... this empire has been acquired by men who knew their duty and had the courage to do it, who in the hour of conflict had the fear of dishonour always present to them, and who, if ever they failed in an enterprise, would not allow their virtues to be lost to their country, but freely gave their lives to her as the fairest offering which they could present at her feast. The sacrifice which they collectively made was individually repaid to them; for they received again each one for himself a praise which grows not old, and the noblest of all tombs, I speak not of that in which their remains are laid, but of that in which their glory survives, and is proclaimed always and on every fitting occasion both in word and deed.”³

American historians have often drawn out the parallels between this funeral oration, and that of Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg. The reminder of what history so far had achieved – “*Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent.....*” Then praise of the State’s values. Then a promise that the sacrifices made would not be in vain.⁴

Why would all that interest us on Remembrance Sunday 2009? A host of thoughts always flood our minds on these occasions – and today I would like just to list three of mine – and then ask, why do we remember?

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Marathon#Legends_associated_with_the_battle

² Herodotus’ Nineteenth Logos: The Battle of Marathon. Book 6:94-140

³ Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War 2.34-2.46

⁴ The Gettysburg Address delivered by Abraham Lincoln November 19 1863

It was just four centuries after the Battle of Marathon that the Roman poet Horace in his Odes was writing "*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*". "It is a sweet and right thing to die for one's native land."⁵

As I read it, even old Pericles didn't go so far. Neither did Abraham Lincoln. And I think it is reasonable to reject Horace as having been wrong there. No one today would embrace the idea of dying for your country as being "sweet". Certainly not the spouses and children of the soldiers who are carried in a seeming unending heart-breaking procession from the rear of aeroplanes at RAF Lyneham and elsewhere. Right or wrong – this is not a situation that anyone would want actually to embrace.

In many ways, Horace's Ode – *Dulce et Decorum est* – was finally undermined by Wilfred Owen who while a patient at Craiglockhart – just a mile from here – in October 1917 drafted his own poem entitled "Dulce et Decorum est". In the poem, Owen himself is the narrator. It tells of a group of soldiers in World War I, forced to trudge "through sludge," though "drunk with fatigue," marching slowly away, from the falling explosive shells behind them, towards a place of rest. As gas shells begin to fall upon them, the soldiers scramble to put on their gas masks to protect themselves. In the rush, one man clumsily drops his mask, and the narrator sees the man "yelling out and stumbling / and floundering like a man in fire or lime." Owen then talks about how he has to throw the man into the back of a wagon and the man's "hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin."

Its last words are:

*If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro Patria mori.*⁶

My first thought, then, is that there may be honour and courage in war – and even sometimes truth – but there is no glory to be discovered.

Pericles' oration was, of course, of its time and clearly nationalistic. The impetus for war was certainly about upholding the values of the Athenian state – but in his world, and in all the centuries since, the values have been identified very closely with nationality and statehood.

I have often visited the military cemetery at Fort George which stands on the hill above St Peter Port. The Fort was built at the end of the 18th century to accommodate the large number of troops sent to the island because of the fear of Napoleonic invasion. For more than a hundred years the garrison was there – with successive regiments of the British army in occupation. The cemetery has many graves of young soldiers, and often their wives and children, sent there to do their duty. Most died of natural causes – infectious diseases

⁵ Horace – Ode 3:2 (written 23 BC)

⁶ The Wilfred Owen Collection. <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/owen>

probably. But they lie there far from home. Among them is a different group of graves. These are the resting places of German soldiers – who occupied the islands during the Second World War. Their deaths were often in raids and skirmishes. But all buried there share a common fact. They are young soldiers – British and German – fighting in causes probably beyond their comprehension – and in that quiet, tree lined plot of ground the truth is that nationality and statehood do not mean a thing! And nor I suspect largely do values. They represent a part of the human condition that seems always to have been, and is still.

Have you noticed that it is largely true that the Falklands War was the last time that our press spent time whipping up nationalist contempt for the so-called enemy? Neither the Iraqis nor the Taliban have been portrayed in the same sub-human way as were the Argentinians. Which is interesting.

So my second thought is that while there is no glory to be discovered in war, neither ultimately is there an underpinning of statehood – for all the ebb and flow of history, and the rise and fall of empires, it is at the end of the day the sameness of the identities of young men and women that points us away from all that terrible chess game of nationality to the tragedy and the pity of maimed young lives.

And my last thought is about the question of values. Pericles majored greatly on “democracy” as the underpinning of the Athenian way of life, and the value that was worth dying for. 2000 years on it hadn’t changed all that much – and while there is some debate these days as whether democracy is the only acceptable form of government to strive for, nevertheless the principle persists that as children of a loving and merciful God our human values often stray far, and pain God deeply. How could we not have dealt with the holocaust? There are values that are inescapable, and may even drag us into war. Remembrance Day brings home to all of us that there are some things worth pursuing; some things worth fighting for; some things worth dying for.

Like justice and peace. And to defend the weak. Those, after all, clearly, time and again we see through the Bible, are the values God expects from us. More – the values God shows us. In the early 20th century there was a long debate in the Times letters page about what was wrong with the world? Was it war? Was it lack of education? G K Chesterton, that towering genius of the Christian Faith wrote the shortest contribution. “What’s wrong with the world?” His letter read, “Dear Sir, I Am. Yours truly, G.K. Chesterton.”

We “remember” today – not to uphold ideas of glory or of nationhood. Such things rise and pass away, and not one of them is worth the life of a young man or woman. But we do remember those who held to themselves a vision of the justice and peace that flows from God – and would risk life and limb to bring that to the oppressed and the victims in this sad world.

We remember them and give thanks for them. They died for their fellow woman and man – and died that they might have freedom. Such were great acts of courage. In our time and in our turn we must honour that by pledging our lives to such freedom – to a world of equal justice between all men and women. How far we are from that – and yet the struggle is still what we are born to – and what people die for, on our behalf.