

REMEMBRANCE TALK AND SERMON – DARLEY ABBEY, 10 am –
111118

As many of you know, I like chasing trains and I like exploring churches. I take lots of photos, and I write a blog – northernvicar.co.uk

It is lovely, thanks to the generosity of Cooperative Funeralcare who have paid for the printing of today's Order of Service, to be able to share some of the pictures with you – in full glorious technicolor.

Let's have a look at the picture on the back cover. Selby Abbey is a huge church in a small town in North Yorkshire. It was built by the Normans about 900 years ago. It was a political statement – we are the new rulers, we are in command, look at how great we are.

This is just one of the windows, but it is the one which is a memorial to the men of the town who died in the First World War. You can't really see the top figures in my photo – it's one of the frustrations of photoing windows from down below – but look at that bottom row.

At both ends you've got soldiers, dressed in their khaki. On the right, looking up – binoculars or gas mask – Mary looking down on him. Can you see the poppies? On the left, having a drink, being led away from danger, with Jesus? In the middle, on the left, Jesus on the cross, looking down at the dying soldier. On the right, an army chaplain, there in the battlefield, bringing communion, a soldier kneeling to take the bread and the wine.

Page 5 – All Saints, King's Lynn – not a church lots of tourists go to, it's hidden away on a pretty grotty estate – the window has colourful figures. Much more fun to do a stunning window with lots of bright colours, rather than soldiers in khaki. In the middle you have Michael, one of the archangels – Gabriel being the one we know – the bible gives us the picture of him fighting with the devil, battling evil – and evil needs to be fought. On the left, holding the flag – who is he? If I said his dragon is missing, would that help? George. On the right – Edmund – East Anglian king, killed by the Danes, “shot full of arrows that he looked like an hedgehog”

Edmund died in 869 – we remember men and women who fought and died, in two world wars and in conflicts since. Evil needs to be fought – our windows remind us we do not fight alone.

SERMON

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Imagine there's no heaven, no religion too – great, let's go home. And the Vicar goes on about his love of church buildings and stained glass windows – yet the bible reading reminds us that they will all fall to dust. Ho hum – life is never straightforward.

It is easy to blame religion for War – look at the pictures we've seen from Pakistan this week, a crowd of Muslims baying for the death of a Christian. Or the Christian conference I was at in Matlock a few weeks ago, where the keynote speaker – former pastor of the biggest church in Derbyshire – assured us that at the end of their lives everyone who doesn't share his faith in the Lord Jesus will be consigned to the everlasting fires of hell. He wants a world with only his religion, and he cannot imagine a heaven which has anyone in it who is different.

The sad truth is that the First World War was fought between Christian nations – and men and women died, most of whom came from those Christian nations, many of whom had worshipped in churches like this, up and down our country, up and down the German countryside. Men and women who did not share the Christian faith, also fought in the trenches. There were Muslims, Jews, Sikhs – men and women of all faiths, and none. One of the great things I want to celebrate this centenary is the amazing work done in so many places bringing people together, regardless of their faith, their background, their creed, their colour – using the example of the past to imagine (and work for) a better world.

We have seven men from the First World War listed on our memorial – we have others too, but I hope they will understand that this centenary year they just step back a bit. Men who went to school here, men who sat and worshipped in this church – perhaps some of them were men of great faith, others only came at Christmas, some may have done their best never to come – because they're human, like us. Look at the display in the porch, look at the page on the church website which I will get loaded as soon as possible – imagine their lives here in Darley Abbey.

Don't forget their families. George Beesley was a clerk in the offices of Walter Evans. On 25 May 1912 he married Annie in this church. He went off to War, served on the Western Front, and was shot by a sniper in the early hours of Friday 28 December 1917. The company chaplain, the Reverend Lownes, had to write to Annie – can you imagine getting that letter? George is buried near Arras, Annie is buried in our churchyard. She never remarried, she died aged 76

in 1962 We have put some flowers on her grave for today – she lived with the consequences of the War right through until 1962 – which is the year I was born.

Don't forget Walter, Jessie and Ivy Bailey. They were related to a family in Darley Abbey, although they actually came from Shepshed down in Leicestershire. They were on the *Lusitania* when she was torpedoed by the Germans on Friday 7 May 1915. They are three of the 1,192 people who died in the waters off the south coast of Ireland. They are remembered in this churchyard – you will see their newly restored memorial as we go down to the War Memorial (and our thanks to Horobins, Monumental Masons, for doing that work for us, free, gratis and for nothing. We are very grateful).

The window on the front cover is from Christ Church in Chesterfield. It's not the church with a crooked spire, it's a little Victorian church on the north side of the town, in the old industrial area, a church which – from the conversation I had with the churchwardens a few weeks ago – which is struggling to stay open. A couple of months ago they hosted a fantastic World War One celebration, exhibitions, talks, they even made the choir stalls into trenches and offered their local schools a trench experience. Brilliant. They had researched all their men who died in the War, and this image in their War Memorial window is taken from a postcard that was in the uniform pocket of one of them. Two soldiers look to the dawn, and the Risen Christ. He is as we/they imagine him that first Easter Sunday morning – dress in white, glowing with light, the marks of the nails from the cross in his hands and his feet, the crown of thorns on his forehead. The man who died for the sin of this world, the man who rose again to defeat evil and sin and death. Some will say that's just their imagination – I dare to believe it is a reality. Love will conquer death. He calls us, not just to imagine his kingdom, but to work for it in this world.

The two windows on page 2 are very personal to me. Slaley is another small chapel – 1832, so just pre-Victorian – in a Northumberland village. I first visited it in December 2013 when our son Gareth was ill in hospital. My world was falling apart, we knew how ill he was, and that his death was the likely outcome. Slaley's war memorial window has a wounded soldier, someone else's son, holding the foot of Christ as his life came to an end. You can probably imagine that I ended up in floods of tears sat in that empty church.

As I turned round to leave, I saw the west window, the one on the right, “To the glory of God, and in proud and sorrowing memory of five of my gallant friends, Captains Guthrie, Laymey, Joicey, Ross and Jackson who gave their lives for King and Empire ...”. I haven't been able to find who the “me” as in ‘my gallant friends’ actually was – but he certainly had a vision of heaven, and knew

his companions were there. That vision gave me / gives me the strength to go on – that vision is freely available to us all – we don't have to imagine God's love, God's purpose, God's Kingdom – it is here for us all to touch and experience and enjoy. We find it in music and worship and community and commemoration – and we thank God for it. We work to bring his kingdom in our village, our schools, our families, our work, our churches.

Next year this church celebrates its bicentenary – 200 years since it was opened. We're making plans – we want to celebrate. Three weeks today we are going to use our morning services, and an hour afterwards to plan together – and we would love it if any of you come and join us. We want to celebrate with, and for, the whole village – we have so much to celebrate together. God is with us, and invites us to share his Kingdom – in this world, and the next.

The church choir is going to sing an anthem for us. The words are by Thomas Campion – he was a poet who lived during the time of Elizabeth I and James I. That's a pretty turbulent period of time – makes the politics of next year look easy. “Do not be alarmed” says the Gospel – “Imagine, the world will live as one.” Amen.