

## ROYAL ENGINEERS

**PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean**

Sunday, September 20<sup>th</sup> 2009

**Trinity 15**

Eph 6: 10-20

11.30am

Rochester Cathedral

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On January 20<sup>th</sup> 2006 it didn't matter what global catastrophe was about to strike us, or what was happening to the economy. It didn't even matter what was happening on Big Brother. No, the front pages of all the UK newspapers were full of only one thing - an 18-foot, 7-tonne northern bottlenosed whale decided to swim up the Thames.

Earlier this week a 31-foot hump-back whale was found floating dead in the Thames near the Dartford Crossing – an extremely rare event.

Neither of those stories had a happy ending, but they both gripped our imagination. Whales in the Thames.

There is another dramatic tale that happened 60 years ago, a bit closer to home. In October 1949 the body of a narwhal whale, usually found in the arctic, washed up at Wouldham, in our very own River Medway. It's not uncommon of course for seals, or even the odd dolphin, to swim up the Medway. But a whale?

Last year, when the Cathedral celebrated the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its builder bishop, Gundulf, Peter Lock dug out an intriguing bit of history. When Gundulf was building this Cathedral, and the Castle opposite, back towards the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, he was granted in law "the whaling rights to the River Medway".

So there you have it, if ever you doubted it. Proof of the impact of climate change. There used to be whales in the river Medway.

All of which is a rather roundabout way of getting to what I wanted to talk about today - or rather, who, I wanted to talk about. The famous whaler, Bishop Gundulf.

In the tour de force of the history of the Royal Engineers, '*Follow the Sapper*', it says this: "Because of his military engineering talents William I's Bishop Gundulf is usually regarded as the 'father of the Corps'".

The Corps of the Royal Engineers claims direct historical descent from William the Conqueror's Military Engineers - even if Gundulf wasn't one of these, he picked up the skills which allowed him to build the White Tower, Rochester Castle, Rochester Cathedral and Priory. He was known as the Builder Bishop, and Gundulf was what can only be described as a polymath - he seems to have been expert in almost everything. Architect, engineer, builder, academic, monk, bishop, artist. Man of prayer and man of action.

On the back of '*Follow the Sapper*', you find the definitive description of a Sapper as "this versatile genius ... astronomer, geologist, surveyor, draughtsman, artist, architect, traveller, explorer, antiquary, mechanic, diver, soldier, and sailor"

All of which, apart from the word 'diver' perhaps, is not a bad description of Gundulf. He was an extraordinary man. And even today, he links the Corps of the Royal Engineers with this very cathedral.

We're proud of this historical connection that Gundulf gives us with the Corps, of the many memorabilia of the Corps dotted around this cathedral – at the West End, in the windows, and so on. And I'm delighted to announce that by next Easter we will have installed a new permanent memorial to the Royal Engineers, in the South West corner of the cathedral, which we will dedicate formally at this service next year.

To some outside observers this connection between a place of worship and a professional fighting wing of the military might seem out of place. After all, wasn't Jesus a pacifist? In the face of the prolonged and often violent military occupation of his land he pointedly refused to align himself with those committed to removing the Roman oppressors by force, and preached instead a gospel of turning the other cheek.

But a quarter of a century after Jesus, it seems that one of his most committed disciples came to a different conclusion about military activity. In today's reading from Ephesians 6 St Paul, in all probability chained to a Roman Centurian in one of his many spells behind bars, uses the armour of the soldier as a metaphor for the spiritual armour that God gives to a soldier of Christ. Paul doesn't condemn the military symbols, but he transforms them and invests them with a deeper meaning.

So, despite the unease about war and legitimised violence which has surfaced throughout 2000 years of Christianity, there has been a long-standing partnership between the church and the military. In the past this may well have been based on ideas that we have long since abandoned, the swirling waters of power that clung to both church and state, ideas of which we may now even be rather ashamed. These days the connections are more subtle and nuanced, for we are all too aware of the suffering that war inflicts - on its combatants, and often, sadly, on its bystanders too.

So what is it, apart from Gundulf, that makes Rochester Cathedral an appropriate place to celebrate and honour the Corps of Royal Engineers? Let me offer a few pointers to why I think we are still joined at the hip.

It was Christian faith and ethics that developed the Just War theory, and in so doing liberated the military to do what they are set apart to do, unencumbered by the sort of ethical hand-wringing that might inhibit decisive action. That is not to let military leaders off the ethical hook, but merely to recognise the vital place that Christian thinking has played in providing a justification for war in certain well-defined circumstances. If those circumstances apply, then military action has an ethical as well as a pragmatic basis. The church, and the military, and the politicians, and the general public, all have a grave responsibility to work together in thinking out the correct course of action in what are often very muddy waters.

You often find that people serving in the military have a profound and thoughtful side to their character, even if they keep it below the surface. This spiritual aspect to the military character is in my view entirely natural, because there is bound to be a spiritual dimension to military life when it is concerned with the weighty matters of life and death. The young soldier patrolling in Helmand Province is risking everything and knows that death or injury may be just around the corner - that is sufficient to concentrate the mind and make people aware of mortality and an eternal dimension to life. I doubt if being a bank clerk has the same effect.

Nor is it possible to have to aim a gun at anyone and pull the trigger without asking some very searching questions about life and its value. Your own, and others too.

Soldiers also live the sort of life that makes big demands on individuals and families. At times rootless, always on the move from one home to another, there are pressures on people that make them seek the strength and support that religious faith offers.

Then there is the common ground of remembrance, valued highly by both the church and the military. Within every service like today's, we hold tenderly the emotions of those who have loved and lost, in the service of their country.

And these links between the church and military life work in the opposite direction too. The routine and discipline of the army resonates with the self-discipline that all the major faiths ask of their adherents. The nature of army existence stresses community, people acting together rather than individually, and this reflects a vital aspect of Christian faith as well.

So I don't think it is possible to wear a military uniform these days without thinking about some very religious questions ...

... to do with justice and righteousness, right and wrong

... to do with sanctity of human life, my own and that of my enemy

... to do with our mortality, and how to live and die well

These are questions that concern all of us, but in a strange way society asks soldiers to carry them vicariously on our behalf. So the connection between the military and the church is vital, and the role of military chaplains essential. In asking these questions we have much in common.

Which brings us back, I suppose, to Gundulf, the father of the Corps. The man who built a military castle and a religious cathedral right next door to each other, and probably didn't give a second thought to the incongruity of that fact. It's easy for us to dismiss Gundulf as merely a man of his time, a time when church and state were too busy playing the power game to notice the conflict of interest. But maybe Gundulf was wise as well as clever, and understood the relationship that would forever exist between the church and the military in a fallen world where evil will always have to be resisted.

The 11<sup>th</sup> century was, after all, a very different time to our own, but some things in life never change. Who knows, underneath all that mud, perhaps whales might still be swimming up the Medway.....