I hope I’ll be forgiven if I begin today’s homily with two brief personal reminiscences. I grew up in Dover on the south coast, a town whose strategic geographical position has left it deeply marked by historical conflicts – whether those be the remnants of the Roman lighthouses which guided the Roman channel fleet stationed there from the 2nd century AD, or the modern early-warning radar towers which loom large behind the castle and have provided defence since the 1940’s even until today. As acting Head of School in my final year, I was often called upon to attend remembrance services – whether Remembrance Sunday itself, or the acts of remembrance for the Dunkerque evacuation and the Zeebrugge landings – and those services were always deeply moving, especially since there were so many more veterans in attendance in those days. Perhaps most poignant, though, were the stories of two churches in the town. One, a tiny mediaeval chapel near the Town Hall, was only re-discovered after the buildings surrounding it were blitzed. The only church dedicated by an English Saint (St Richard of Chichester) to an English Saint (St Edmund of Abingdon), it has since been restored and is regularly used by my parish. In a way, it is a tiny sign of resurrection – a church reborn in the midst of destruction. The second, St James’, was one of only two of the mediaeval parishes in Dover to survive the Reformation – but was blown to pieces by shells fired from the cliffs above Calais in WWII. More importantly than the physical damage, those shells also blew apart a Christian community which had remained faithful to the Gospel for close to a thousand years. Left in ruins, that little church stands as a memorial to the destructiveness of war; I would often sit there as a boy, reflecting on the horrors the town had suffered – it was not known as “Hellfire Corner” for nothing – reflecting on the nearness of evil.

When I became a Housemaster at Ampleforth, one of the first things I did was to produce a Roll of Honour for Remembrance Day. My house, St Dunstan’s, was founded in 1935, so the first group of boys to enter went straight from school into the armed services in 1939-40. Each Remembrance Sunday at House Prayers, we would read the list of names of those “founding members” of the House killed in action, their regiments and their age when they died. Often, the 6th formers in the chapel were older than those whose names were read out – and year by year, that simple act of commemoration never failed to leave us all with a profound sense both of shock and indebtedness. As the old line runs: we gave our tomorrow, to buy your today.

Perhaps those reflections give a different context to the familiar words of today’s readings. In the gospel, Jesus again criticises the “professional religious” of his day – pointing to the hypocrisy of the scribes who seem to be more interested in status and respect than the welfare of those they should be serving as ministers of the Covenant. And he concludes with that familiar comment on the “Widow’s mite” – praising the generosity and trust of that woman, whilst condemning those whose offering is really only “spare
change”, no matter how much the amount. But perhaps today, we may hear Jesus’ words slightly differently. I am only too well aware that it is becoming increasingly controversial to say this in our modern, somewhat squeamish society, but nonetheless, I think there is still some truth in the notion that those who died in the great wars of the last century, and perhaps especially in the war against the evil of Nazism, were – in some sense – making the same offering as that widow, putting in their all for the defence of truth and justice. I think there is still a case for honouring the fallen who, for the sake of truth and justice, fulfilled those words of the Lord: “greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (Jn.15:13), and – with Christ – made the ultimate sacrifice.

Yet there is something else we also need to hear in those words today. In both our first reading and in the gospel, we hear of widows and orphans – the generous trusting widow of the gospel, the pitiable and starving yet equally generous widow and her son whom Elijah encounters. And our world is no stranger to widows and orphans today, especially those who are left behind as the casualties of conflict, those forced into exile from their homes, those – like that shattered church in Dover – whose communities have been blown apart by war after millennia of stability and faithfulness. There are many widows and orphans today. And that, perhaps, poses a very direct question to each one of us. It asks us what we are doing to be Elijah to those widows and orphans. It asks us what we, from all the giftedness we have received from the Lord, what we are doing to show the presence and care of God for them, just as Elijah did. Are we going to be like the widow of the gospel, and give all we can to make sure that their measure of wheat is not spent, their flask of oil not emptied? Or will we be like those whom Jesus criticises – wealthy enough in time and resources and prayer, but only giving our “loose change”? How can we be Elijah – bringing the love and power of God tangibly into their lives?

One final thought. There is a very telling little phrase heard often on this day: “Lest we forget”. It is an important phrase, I think. The whole story of the Old Testament is one in which the people of Israel constantly forget the mighty deeds the Lord had done for them, constantly forget the power he has shown to set them free and give them life. And just like them, that forgetfulness is a temptation for us too. We need to keep that phrase – “Lest we forget” – constantly in our minds both today and in the future. As year by year the events of the great wars slowly recede into deeper history, we must not forget the price paid by so many to keep us free, to defend our rights and our lives. And remembering, we should keep solemn commemoration of their sacrifice, in prayer for them and in thanksgiving for them, just as we do on this day. But also, and perhaps especially in our own times, when war is increasingly fought at a distance and by technology, and when we see day by day in the media tragic conflicts which seem only to anaesthetise us to violence, we must likewise never forget the horrors of war and the true victims of war – those many widows and orphans who can so easily become simply numbers on a screen, those many torn and uprooted from life, and – remembering – we must pray and work for them too. This day is a huge opportunity for us – to hold up to the Lord those who have died, to hold up to the Lord all those suffering from the effects of conflict – and to ask him, to plead with him, for his
gifts of mercy and of peace, that we may find – like that little chapel in Dover – a path to resurrection amidst all our wars. Amen.
Bidding Prayers: Remembrance Day

Intro: Fr Oswald

D: Let us pray for the Church throughout the world:
Let us pray that the Church may be a sign of God’s love and reconciliation for all peoples, and let us ask God to grant all Christians the grace and courage to work tirelessly for peace and for justice.
Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for those parts of the world torn apart by conflict:
Let us ask God to send his Spirit to all peoples of goodwill, of all faiths and of none, that together they may work to bring peace to our shattered world.
Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for those serving in our Armed Forces:
Let us ask God to strengthen with his grace all who serve to uphold peace and justice. We pray especially for those units of the Royal Navy protecting refugees in the Mediterranean, and the General Staff and soldiers of the British Army on the Rhine, working closely with the German authorities to find shelter and support for the many refugees in that country.
Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all victims of war:
May God come to the aid of all those injured, displaced or otherwise afflicted by war, and may he inspire us to a new generosity of spirit, to give what help we really can.
Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for the faithful departed:
We pray for those of our own armed services who gave up their lives so that we might have life. We pray for all innocent victims of warfare. We pray too, in fulfilment of the Lord’s own teaching, for all those of the dead who in this life have been our enemies. May the God of all mercy show the fullness of his mercy to all the departed, for whom Christ died and rose again.
Lord, in your mercy...

Concluding Prayer