

The Address by The Very Revd Dr Wesley Carr Dean of Westminster

The vicar was dreaming: he was in his church preaching. He then woke up and found that he was. After Sara Jones' moving personal understanding of The Army Benevolent Fund, both as a volunteer and the recipient of its generosity, this preacher has the other preacher's nightmare: all that needs to be said has been elegantly said already.

As we commemorate your 60 years of service, Sara and I are trying something different. This is not strictly a sermon. As Sara has offered us her personal and down to earth view of the charity, I will try in the context she has set, to identify some of the larger issues that the Fund raises. Together may they point us to the living God.

It is appalling, but nevertheless true, that there has scarcely been a day since 1944 when the British Army has not been in action somewhere in the world. So a fund that was set up in the faith that it would possibly not be needed in the longer term, has become even more significant and more necessary. 60 years now seems very little time in our world. The stories of the individuals that Sara told us are all too familiar. There is need in the Army as much as in any other facet of our society.

The autumn in Europe has a melancholy tinge to it. We remember. We wonder when (indeed 'if') winter will come and what it will bring.

The woods decay, the leaves decay and fall;
And after many a summer dies the swan.

It is a time for remembrance, for taking stock. We remember those who have died; we remember all those who still suffer. But before we get to that, can we remember why we have an army in the first place? Our increasingly media saturated world shows us more of the army in action than ever our predecessors saw. Yet they had a greater sense of the army as a whole and its place in society compared with us who are losing our sense of the army as a component of our society.

To make sense of benevolence we must have an army that fights. There are no two ways about it: soldiers whether men or women, put their lives on the line for the sake of something - nation, possibly Queen and country, possibly a friend, or possibly an imagined threat. Sometimes they die and they are remembered as the fallen. But many others live on, needing support and care.

Every conflict has its rights and wrongs. Some are notably wrong and have been throughout history. But alongside them there are some noble causes which have been manifestly right - although rarely have things been quite as black and white as we might wish. In retrospect, for example, the Second World War is regarded as "clean" in that it was justified and the allies fought a great evil and were victorious. For some the Falklands war was not so clear cut: but again there was a firm sense of the nation being behind its army which on its behalf recovered those lands at a cost, including perhaps most famously Sara's husband. But in the Middle East at the moment things are nowhere near as obvious in that regard. I suspect the army feels out on a limb, possibly forgotten and certainly not very confident in the outcome of the whole

enterprise. The army is made up of human beings like you and me.

Soldiers are not immune from the needs and desires and hopes and fears of the ordinary citizen. Indeed, we might argue that they are more aware of them because of the sort of the work they do. For that work is done on behalf of the rest of us, which is loosely called 'society'.

These reflections pick up a theme that runs through Sara Jones's testimony: the notion of acting on behalf of someone. To do something on behalf of another is not to act instead of them, but to represent them. 'H' Jones charged the hill on behalf of us. The army does not fight **instead of** you or me: it fights on **behalf of** you or me. In other words it operates in the areas of danger, sacrifice and potential death, which we all know are there but which we all wish to avoid.

In practice - and no charity is more practical than the Fund - when the soldier fights he needs to be assured of some basics if concern with them is not to distract him. For example, he needs to know that if he is killed, he will not be forgotten but properly remembered. That is why war memorials are so significant and remain so. Secondly he hopes to be treated with respect if he is wounded. Respect for the dead and wounded is exposed in the way the army handles bodies. Our dead no longer automatically occupy "a corner of a foreign field". We have begun to follow the American custom of bringing the dead back. Again, the policy of closing military hospitals and amalgamating them with civilian ones may make rational sense. But it sadly misses the symbolic dimension. A military hospital is not better or different or more skilled in certain injuries, but it understands that it is part of a backup system upon which the soldier relies. And he knows that behind him are those (like the fund) holding on his behalf the loving aspects of life while he gets on with the fighting.

Thus out of Sara's testimony we see again the mixing together of all sorts when it comes to basics - rationalised death, illness after being wounded, the legitimacy of the conflict and so on. Because these ills are common to all men and women, the Army Benevolent Fund can (and does) treat people as equals. Here any hierarchy of rank gives way to a recognition of the hierarchy of welfare: the greatest need takes the highest rank.

This is a large issue for the Army: it is also an important one for the church and indeed all who have a faith by which live. If our soldier is to fight the enemy and risk being killed himself, it is important for him to know that behind him stands someone, or some body, some regiment or corps, some hospital which will be distinctively concerned with him and his colleagues, and we should add here his or her family. Again, if we may recall the Falklands, you will remember how significant the medical officer became because word went round that the wounded did not die in his hospital.

The Christian Gospel, is concerned with similar places of hope, wherever they may be found. The Benevolent Fund employs its resources to make each individual a point of hope within the large fields of human endeavour. And the voluntary spirit at the heart of the enterprise makes the Fund what it is and for which we thank God today on behalf of those thousands who have been helped and every individual who has been trusted and discovered true benevolence.

May God bless you all for the next 60 years during which it sadly looks as though the Army Benevolent Fund will be needed as much as ever. Let us with a sense of his mercy thank God for all that is past and let us pray with reasoned confidence for whatever is to come; above all let us commend to God those who today are being cared for by the Fund, that between them they may discover the true meaning of benevolence.

