**Remembrance Sunday, 12 November 2017**

**Sermon by Canon Peter Campion, Precentor of St Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin**

James McClean is a national hero. Though not known for his goal scoring prowess, he scored the one and only goal against Wales last month to propel Ireland into the play off to qualify for next year’s World Cup. James McClean also refuses to wear the poppy. I admire him for that.

My grandfather and his two brothers fought in World War I. He was in Gallipoli. Having read about Gallipoli, I can only but imagine what that experience was like. Unfortunately for his family, he refused to speak about it when he returned. He wrote letters to his sister regularly during the War and though interesting to read, the letters really focus on news of what was happening at home in Ireland rather than what was happening on the battlefield. I suppose that even if he had wanted to say something about his experience the letters might have been censored. I wear a poppy each year to remember him and his brothers (who were among the fortunate ones who came back from the War) as well as to remember the 50,000 Irish and others who were not so fortunate. I don’t expect people to admire me for wearing the poppy, but I hope they will respect my choice.

So why do I admire rather than just respect James McClean? It isn’t for his gritty toughness which makes every member of the opposition team look over their shoulder, wondering where he is on the pitch. No, it is because he chooses not to wear a poppy. In the last ten years everyone on British television, whether delivering the news, commentating on sports, X Factor judges and contestants, Strictly Come Dancing performers, you name it, are ostentatiously wearing their poppies. It would be hard to find a public figure in England not wearing a poppy; someone not wearing a poppy stands out like a sore thumb.

James McClean falls into that category. Playing for West Bromwich Albion, he came on as a substitute last week only to be booed by visiting Manchester City fans and by some home fans as they were playing in the Hawthornes. I think that is disgraceful. He has never made an issue of it but others have made it an issue. When questioned about his decision not to wear the poppy, he says that being from Derry, Bloody Sunday is still a reminder to him of the painful presence of British soldiers at that time. James McClean may not have been alive in 1972, but it would be very much part of his family narrative growing up. He shows great restraint, strength and integrity in enduring these annual taunts, but it must be very difficult and hurtful for him nonetheless.

My grandfather, upon returning from World War I, did not receive a hero’s welcome in Ireland, quite the opposite. He was often derided and scorned for his decision to enter the British Army. Some felt that he was a traitor; he should have been at home fighting for Ireland’s independence. When a Service of Remembrance was held here in St. Patrick’s Cathedral at the end of the War, protestors outside the entrance to the Cathedral voiced their opinions strongly. This must have been hard on those who had felt that they were away protecting this land. I am sure that my grandfather handled the taunts that he received with restraint and integrity, but I know from my mother that he found them very hurtful. Having left Trinity College to go to war aged seventeen, he returned to the university again after the War and was ordained a priest in the Church of Ireland. He went on to become Dean of Ferns and died not much older than I am now from a heart condition which was the lingering result of war injuries when he had been hospitalised in Egypt. Unfortunately, he died before I was born, but my mother told me that we would have got on really well as we are both so interested in sport.

Fortunately, as a nation we have moved on a great deal over the last hundred years. There are no longer protests outside the Cathedral doors. It is always a privilege to welcome the President of Ireland to this service which would have been unheard of not so long ago. The visit of the President of Ireland to Windsor Castle, the first state visit of a President of Ireland in 2014, as well as the Queen’s visit to Ireland in 2011, have brought considerable healing to the fractured Irish-British relationship. Even here in the North Transept of this Cathedral, where the many war memorials are kept, there is now a Tree of Remembrance giving people the opportunity to post notes praying for those affected by conflict today and for peace. Its neighbour is the famous door of reconciliation. We remember history so we can learn not to make the same mistakes again.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus calls on us to love one another. Loving our neighbour as ourselves and loving our enemy are central to Jesus’s teaching. When people hear the unofficial but widespread story of the ‘Christmas Truce’, which was made into a folk song by John McCutcheon in 1984, when British and German soldiers came together at Christmas in 1914 to sing carols together, exchange gifts and play football, they find it unbelievable and extraordinary. But that isn’t extraordinary behaviour; it is normal behaviour. The destruction of human life on every other day during those years was what was extraordinary and abnormal.

I went to a military boarding school in Canada for five years. Every morning we would walk into chapel and see the grainy photographs in the entrance of the young students who went off to war. That chapel, built in 1922, is called the Memorial Chapel, commemorating those students who lost their lives in World War I. As students we had to learn by heart the poem ‘In Flanders Fields’ by Canadian poet, physician, artist and author Lieutenant John McCrea. He was inspired to write it after presiding over the funeral of a fellow soldier, Alexis Heimer, who died in the second battle of Ypres in the Flanders region of Belgium. It is because of this poem, and its references to the red poppies that grew over the graves of fallen soldiers, that the remembrance poppy has become one of the world’s most recognised symbols for soldiers who have died in conflict.

I think John McCrea would be horrified to think that this symbol could become a symbol of division, or national identity, or even a fashion statement. It is quite simply a symbol of memorial, of the grim reality of the terrible loss of life, the heroic and the selfless as well as the needless and the thoughtless. John McCrea simply wanted to remember and honour his friend.