AT THE GOING DOWN OF THE SUN...

Our short Evening Service draws on the simple format of a Field Service of the sort typically held for troops on the eve of battle. A reading, a short reflection, a familiar hymn, and prayers – prayers for soldiers’ families, who felt especially far away at times like this; prayers for their comrades, on whom their life might depend, and whose lives might be in their hands too; and prayers for themselves, for strength and courage to face whatever lay ahead.

INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries in times of peace as in time of war, the distinctive sound of the bugle has called troops to respond in differing ways to its differing notes: to muster and to march, to advance, to charge and to cease fire, to wake, to sleep, to remember. Tonight here in the shadow of the Scottish National War Memorial the bugle calls us to worship, to ask God’s blessing on our national commemoration of the outbreak of the Battle of the Somme, to seek a sense of his enduring presence and to renew our faith in his unchanging purpose of goodwill and peace on earth. As our vigil in this sacred place continues, let us reflect for now on the eve of battle exactly one hundred years ago and on all the thoughts and emotions that must have run through the minds of those preparing to leave their trenches and go over the top the next morning, not least those serving with the fifty one Scottish battalions that would be mobilized on the battlefield. Let us remember too how Jesus had his own eve of battle experience, as he gathered with his friends in the Garden of Gethsemane to prepare for his own time of testing the very next day.

READING

St Mark 14:32-42

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

REFLECTION

Distress and agitation, fear and hesitation, resolve and resolution; surely every aspect of the intense experience of Jesus and his disciples in the darkness of the Garden of Gethsemane would have resonated with the troops crammed into the trenches of the Somme as darkness
fell a hundred years ago tonight. Contemporary records certainly reflect a similar range of thoughts and feelings. Tearful leave-takings from those left back down the line and thoughtful silences as the soldiers approached the front are mixed with memories of an increasing sense of comradeship and determination. Sometimes singing would start up in a vain attempt to drown out the noise of the guns as the relentless artillery bombardments continued, attempts as futile as others to grab some sleep once the trenches had been reached and occupied, but where there was no room to lie down. Some would scribble on whatever scrap of paper they could find an urgent letter to a loved one, or a last will and testament. Standing there in the darkness, leaning on one another for support, already exhausted from previous battles, waiting and wondering at what lay ahead, thoughts would naturally have turned to home and to family and many of those thoughts would have turned to prayers for their families, for their comrades, for themselves. Some would whisper the Lord’s Prayer, others the words of their Regimental Collect. Shortly we shall say together both the Lord’s Prayer and the Regimental Collect of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, which draws so much on the prayers of its antecedent regiments and sums up so much the determination of the typical Scottish soldier serving under the cross of St Andrew to be brave in battle and resolute in adversity. But for now on the eve of battle and adversity, distress and agitation, fear and hesitation, resolve and resolution, in the darkness of the Somme as in the darkness of Gethsemane, as the hour of the time of trial drew near. And for those whose hour would come tomorrow morning, perhaps some consolation that Jesus Christ, the Son of Man who had endured his own eve of battle, would share tonight in theirs. Before those prayers let us sing as they would have sung – unaccompanied – the words of the familiar evening hymn, Abide with me:

**HYMN**

Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;  
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide:  
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;  
Earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away;  
Change and decay in all around I see:  
O thou who changest not, abide with me.

I need thy presence every passing hour;  
What but thy grace can foil the tempter’s power?  
Who like thyself my guide and stay can be?  
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless;  
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness:  
Where is death’s sting? Where, grave, thy victory?  
I triumph still if thou abide with me.

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes,  
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;  
Heaven’s morning breaks, and earth’s vain shadows flee:  
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.
PRAYERS

Gracious God our Heavenly Father, on this night when we commemorate and commend to your eternal keeping all those who were ready to live and die in the service of others, we are glad to remember that your purposes for us are good, that you gave Jesus Christ for the life of the world, and that you lead us by the Holy Spirit into the paths of righteousness and peace. Loving God, keep us mindful of all your benefits, and heedful of our high calling, that we may yield ourselves in new obedience to your holy will, and live henceforth as those who are not their own, but are bought with a great price, that we may be taught to live by those who learned to die. Tonight we give thanks for those who one hundred years ago were watching and waiting, and willing to lay down their lives for their friends – we give thanks for their sense of courage and commitment, for their sense of duty and devotion, for their sense of service and sacrifice. And we give thanks especially for those whose names are written here on the rolls of honour in the shrine at the heart of the Scottish National War Memorial; may the candles we will shortly place beside them represent our resolve always to keep alight the flame of remembrance for those compatriots and companions of our way who fought and died to bring light to a dark world. And all this we ask through Him who is the light of the world, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Regimental Collect of the Royal Regiment of Scotland

God of our fathers, whose hand shapes the coastlands and hills of home, fashion likewise our lives. Guard the Royal Regiment of Scotland; keep us brave in battle, resolute in adversity, loyal to comrade and Crown; that inspired by the faith and cross of Saint Andrew, we might secure lasting peace and eternal rest; through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

THE BENEDICTION

May God the Holy Trinity guard and defend you on every side, sustain you in times of trial, and strengthen you in faith and hope; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you all this night and always. Amen.

After the Benediction a piper will play as two candles are carried into the Shrine of the Scottish National War Memorial and placed alongside the casket containing the Rolls of Honour of the First World War to mark the formal beginning of the overnight vigil.