



## Ready for Battle.

Rev. Neil Gardner, MA BD

Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2017. The Brick Presbyterian Church, New York.

**Ezekiel 37:10** *And they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

What a great pleasure it is to be back with you here in The Brick Church once again and to bring you this time not only the greetings and good wishes of the Kirk Session and congregation of Canongate Kirk but our heartfelt congratulations on your 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I think that means you're catching us up; it certainly means our respective congregations share a proud sense of history and heritage. Next Sunday evening I shall be back in one of the more historical corners of my own parish, the Scottish National War Memorial at the heart of Edinburgh Castle, for a service marking another anniversary, in this case the hundredth anniversary to the day since the outbreak of the Battle of Arras on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1917. During the course of these four years marking the centenary of the First World War – and incidentally this coming Thursday marks the centenary of the day the United States of America formally joined the war on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1917 – there have been a number of similar commemorations, and those in Scotland have commemorated in particular the Scottish soldiers who fought and died in some of its major battles, the Battle of Loos, the Battle of the Somme, and now next week the Battle of Arras. This battle was particularly significant for Scotland because between them the Scottish Regiments of the British Army fielded no fewer than forty-four battalions, and alongside them were a further seven Canadian battalions with Scottish names: Seaforth Highlanders, Cameron Highlanders, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the Black Watch, The Royal Scots, the King's Own Scottish Borderers and many other familiar names in one form or another together combined in what historians now suggest was the greatest ever concentration of Scottish troops on a battlefield in history. *And they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

At least they did a hundred years ago today, a week before the battle began, *they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.* As the battle unfolded Ezekiel's powerful prophecy would be tragically rewound yet again as the slain were reduced to so many bones lying in the valley. Out of a total of 159,000 allied troops who would lose their lives, nearly a third of them were Scots. And next Sunday, in the Scottish National War Memorial where the names of the fallen are contained in a casket that is fixed to the very rock of Edinburgh Castle, we will remember them. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them. But today we remember how *they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.* A week before it all began. As they got themselves ready for battle. In the end the Battle of Arras did not represent the lasting breakthrough that had been hoped for, not least because by now the troops were completely exhausted. It was nearly three years since the war had first begun and the naive enthusiasm of the summer of 1914 had quickly given way to deeper and darker feelings, poignantly expressed in a poem written by Lieutenant Ewart Alan Mackintosh of the Seaforth Highlanders after taking part in the Battle of the Somme:

*The wild war pipes were calling,  
Our hearts were blithe and free  
When we went up the valley  
To the death we could not see.  
Clear lay the wood before us  
In the clear summer weather,  
But broken, broken, broken  
Are the sons of the heather.*

*And they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.* By contrast our other reading set for today reminds us of one who would follow Ezekiel's unexpected pattern and live again and stand on his own two feet again when Jesus went on to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead. According to the chronology of John's Gospel it's now about a week before Jesus would face his own final battle. The eleventh chapter concludes by telling us that the Passover of the Jews was near, and the twelfth opens six days before the Passover when Jesus is back at Bethany, at the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. It was then that Mary would anoint him with her costly perfume, and the very next day he would make his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. For us today, a week before Palm Sunday, it's a time to reflect on the tension that was building as Jesus got himself ready for battle. And tried to prepare his disciples for all that lay ahead. I wonder if there's a comparison to be drawn here with the soldiers preparing a hundred years ago today for the Battle of Arras, exhausted and apprehensive, three long years after it all began.

Because it was now three long years after the disciples began to follow Jesus, three long years since Andrew and Peter and James and John had been called away from their fishing boats and nets left drifting in the waters at the edge of the Sea of Galilee, three long years since they had left behind their homes and their families and their workplaces and cheerfully and optimistically set off into the unknown, without the first idea of what lay ahead. They had watched and learned from the teaching and preaching of Jesus; they had waited and wondered as he healed the sick and cast out demons, as he raised the dead and consorted with outcasts and challenged the authority of the scribes and the Pharisees. And now, three years on they found themselves exhausted and apprehensive on the threshold of another battle, and of all the battles they'd fought under his leadership already this one felt different, this one felt real, this one felt ominous.

Out on the battlefields of France today there's an impressive memorial to the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division, a magnificent cairn topped by a kilted Highland soldier and a Gaelic phrase which translates "Friends are good on the day of battle", but the quality of the disciples' friendship would soon be tested as these critical days of battle unfolded and found them denying and deserting Jesus at every turn.

*Clear lay the wood before us  
In the clear summer weather,  
But broken, broken, broken  
Are the sons of the heather.*

Friends are good on the day of battle. Jesus had good friends in Martha and Mary and Lazarus, and found sanctuary in their home at Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem as he prepared to make his triumphal entry into the city the following day, as he got himself ready for battle. Just a week later, the strife would be o'er, the battle done as the Easter hymn puts it and I wonder if those good friends would call to mind the words he had once shared with them outside the tomb of Lazarus, words we ourselves should call to mind as we come to share in the bread and wine of the Last Supper once again, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." *And they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.* And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever.

Amen.