

# TWO SERMONS

by  
Kurt Hahn

Gordunstoun School  
Elgin

## I QUINQUAGESIMA

*“...Pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whatsoever liveth is counted dead before Thee...”*

Compassion seems a great impediment in war. There is a school of thought which maintains men will be better fighters if they are cruel and bloodthirsty—and for a time in this country training for battle included training in hatred and bloodlust. This was a short-lived undertaking—the public had cried out in disgust.

But we have all heard of the oath of the Russian Guerilla Fighters:

“...I promise to avenge always mercilessly and without pity. Blood shall be avenged by blood and death by death.”

There is a fierce grandeur about this oath. It is born of an agony we have not experienced, we have no right to sit in judgment, but for all that no Christian can make this vow of vengeance his own.

How do the young stand in 1943? I was speaking the other day to boys of 16 or 18 from all classes of society. I was talking on the moratorium of the Sermon on the Mount, and said we had to rescind this moratorium, and to rescind it before the war ends, if it is to end decently. A boy, thoughtful and determined, interrupted me: “Supposing I was on Home Guard Duty and had taken prisoner a German airman who had been machine-gunning my village in daylight—well, I admit I must obey regulations, and would endeavour to escort him safely to the Police Station. But supposing a crowd of enraged villagers caught sight of him and came in a body to tear him to pieces—must I protect him? If necessary, by force of arms?”

I told him by not defending his prisoner he would not only disobey—so I hoped—his conscience, but certainly the Prime Minister, who had called on the people of this country

to fight for our Christian civilization. The boy then replied—“This is all right in peacetime, but for the duration we should hold with ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’.”

The young of today are as sheep not having a shepherd: they are groping for guidance. Can victory only be won by half of us turning savage and the other half deaf of soul, or at least dissembling the mercy that is within us? That is a terrible price to pay. It is unnecessary.

A brave fighter is, above all, a man who has the power to overcome: to overcome his fear and, if need be, to overcome his pity. But he is by no means a fearless or pitiless man. One of the bravest of Napoleon’s Generals—General Hoche—used to say to his body on going into battle:

“Carcass, you tremble, but how would you tremble if you knew where I was leading you.”

There never was as great and formidable a guerilla leader as Garibaldi—yet there never was a gentler warrior. A noble aim held him enthralled and made him triumph at need over the very sweetness of his own nature. The death penalty was only very rarely inflicted by him, and then only on partisans who did violence to helpless prisoners or civilians. George Trevelyan says of him:

“And to us of other lands and most of all to us Englishmen, Garibaldi will live as the incarnate symbol of two passions not likely to die out of the world—the love of country and the love of freedom, kept pure by the one thing that can tame and yet no weaken them, the tenderest humanity for all mankind.”

*I maintain the British sword is all the sharper the cleaner it is.* The majority may be carried away by the passions of the hour, war coarsening may have eaten deeply into the fibre of the nation—a Christian minority will resist, and it is their faith that will count as a source of strength and renewal in times of crisis. They will always do their duty, but they have no command over their own belief in the sacredness of our cause. When Nazi jargon insidiously corrupts our language, and we gloat about the suffering of the innocent among the enemy, then a blight falls on the faith of the best. These best are to be found among men and women in all walks of life. I am remembering what was done in the last war by Britain’s greatest climber on the Italian front. He crawled again and again through barbed wire into the Austrian fire to rescue cholera-sick, left there by Italians to perish. I am thinking of a Naval Commander in this war who startled his mother by writing, “If hatred is to play the tune I am turning Pacifist.” She read in the paper next day that her son had won the D.S.O.

Only yesterday I spoke to a Merchant Service Officer. His leg had been torn to pieces by shellfire from a surface raider in the South Atlantic and then he was machined-gunned on the raft to which he had swum through the shark-infested sea.

“I saw,” so he said, “German sailors writhing with shame.”

I questioned him: “What do you mean? You saw?” “No, I do not mean with my physical eyes.”

“How did you have this certainty?” I asked.

“The brotherhood of the sea,” was his answer.

I am recalling the conversation with an Aberdeenshire railway man. He was over sixty, with three sons at the Front, and I met him in the north on a lonely country lane. He turned to me: “Do you know what this war is all about?”

I said I did not, but could he tell me. And this was his answer: “We are fighting the cholera and the plague; we are making progress against tuberculosis. But we have made no headway yet against one of the worst diseases of men—the passion of nations to settle their disputes by violence.”

I said: “How would you tackle this disease?” He answered, “By the Christian purpose of life.”

I thought I would like to test the validity of his Christianity and I put this question to him:

“Suppose a disabled German airman landed here; he was helpless in your power—he had quite likely been killing fishermen off Kintore, perhaps your own kinsfolk, what would you do with him?”

“Do with him?” he answered, “Nothing whatever: I would have him interned and teach him the purpose of the world. But before that, I would do one thing to him: I would point to these cows in the field and tell him he has the same say in the government of his country as these cows have; in fact, I would make him feel a tool, and ashamed of being a tool.”

The Christians in this country are longing for a sign to rally. Among a minority—a minority which is potentially powerful—there was never a greater readiness to accept the leadership of Christian statesmanship. Such leadership cannot be given unless the fiction of spiritual unity be surrendered. We are only united on one issue—the need for victory; victory complete and overwhelming. Thank God, we are not a monochrome nation like Hitler wants Germany to appear. We are deeply divided on the spiritual issues of the war, and of the peace to come. Christian statesmanship cannot speak out without challenging the anti-Christ in our midst.

For this challenge, all Christian England and Christian Europe are waiting. I include Christian Germany and Christian Russia. All want to hear the Nazis indicted more often and as fiercely as ever. They want to hear their crimes mentioned without sparing us the authentic and terrible details which a reluctant and sluggish imagination finds it hard at

all times to visualize and which many of us would fain be spared, so as not to disturb a peace of mind to which we have no right. They want to hear the watchword again and again:

“No peace with the murderers, no peace with their condoners who know better and never risk their lives to save hostages from being shot, prisoners from being tortured, Jews from being exterminated.”

They want to hear the German armed forces taunted with their servility. It would be only truth to add that our citizen armies would be turned into hosts of conscientious objectors were they ever ordered to carry out those merciless and fiendish practices which the German soldiers have now adopted as their routine duties. They want to hear the voice of great compassion, not only with Nazi victims outside Germany, but with millions of Germans who are now suffering and struggling under Hitler. They want to be informed if at any time our fighting forces have encountered a better Germany capable of redemption. They are anxiously hoping for a promise that discriminating and stern justice will be done by a victorious England from which a cleansed and liberated Germany has nothing to fear.

This would indeed be the right moment for such a challenge. Germany is in the throes of a new levee en masse. Once more Hitler calls on the German people to close the ranks against implacable enemies who have, so he says, only one aim: Germany's extinction as a nation. Millions still cling to Hitler as their only hope, but millions, in grim despair, are looking eastward since Stalin has promised to spare a Germany that has thrown off the Nazi yoke.

Christian Germany is waiting, and is, so far, waiting in vain that the light be lit in the West.

Tension will grow and the moment may come when well-chosen words could release a revolution—we should be under no illusion, nothing will spare us the necessity to invade and liberate Europe at the cost of a great number of precious lives. Until Germany is defeated, revolutions against Hitler are doomed to failure, but even though they are ruthlessly crushed, they may well hasten the final defeat.

A challenge thrown out by Christian statesmanship cannot fail to lead to a spiritual crisis in England. The flimsy and fraudulent truce between the opposing spiritual forces will be torn to shreds, thereby only throwing into greater relief the unshakable determination of a nation united for victory.

Will Christian England prevail? To answer this question we must not only count the number of right-minded people: we must realize that, today, many of the wisest and noblest courteously retreat before prejudices they despise.

The issue may well depend on one man. It is a question of destiny, not only for England, but for Europe, whether or not the great warrior, Winston Churchill, will recapture the

vision of the statesman. I am thinking of how, in the hour of victory, Winston Churchill urged and implored the Governments of France and England to rush foodstuffs into the starving enemy countries. I am recalling how, in 1927, he pointed the one way which might have made the rise of Hitler impossible: the reconciliation of France and Germany under the guidance of England. I quote the last words in *The World Crisis*.

“Is this the end? Is it to be merely a chapter in a cruel and senseless story? Will a new generation in their turn be immolated to square the black accounts of Teuton and Gaul? Will our children bleed and gasp again in devastated lands? Or will there spring from the very fires of conflict that conciliation of the three giant combatants, which would unite their genius and secure to each in safety and freedom a share in rebuilding the glory of Europe?”

The outcome of the spiritual crisis is unpredictable. I fear the powers of vindictiveness might prove too formidable. They are drawing strength daily from the inequities of the Nazis and from the stifled cry of vengeance that is echoing round Europe. But the tomorrow can be ours.

I draw hope and consolation from the young of England. They can be reclaimed for Christianity. I am thinking of the training in Christian practice. The war has brought a revelation. The task of saving lives enthralls the young no less than the task of fighting.

I ask you to watch members of Service Corps, how they take infinite trouble to master complicated and meticulous drills as Fire Force dispatch riders, as members of St. John Ambulance Brigade, as H.M. Coast Guards; their practices are indeed varied, but the Samaritan purpose is behind them all, demanding coolness, skill and devotion. I shall never forget the sight of young watchers standing for hours on a stormy night in the Coast Guard hut on the Morayshire coast, ready like “a lance at rest lest a vessel in distress burns an inefficient flare.” Such services must never fade out of the lives of the young. They must have their place of importance in the plan of Christian education. Through Christian worship and through Christian teaching, the young may well receive the inspiration. They will not retain it unless their power of compassion is kept alive.

All of us are tempted by the sloth of habit, by the bitterness of failure and frustration, by the hardness born of success, by the pride of wealth, by the arrogance of knowledge, by the insolence of office; we are all continually tempted to disregard the rights of our fellow men in favour of our own interests. We are not only tempted to break Christ’s law, but to make ourselves believe that we are not breaking it, by garbling evidence, or avoiding it, or making convenient guesses where certainty is at hand, or by embracing maxims of conduct to suit the needs of our particular temptation—maxims that justify—at times even dutify our sins.

Our conscience is always struggling against what seem irresistible temptations, and against self-deception operating in the service of these temptations—of greed, of prestige, of malice of comfort. Over these temptations conscience could triumph every time if it could call to its help a counterforce, an ally: an ally strong enough to draw off from the

besetting temptations sufficient emotional power to make them resistible. Compassion is that ally, the most powerful that conscience can have; compassion that is forever in vigilant readiness to dominate the inner life of the true Christian. "He who does not love men does not know God." We can add—he who does not love men cannot recognize God's will. Conscience is ever again held in emotional bondage. Compassion alone can liberate it.

I should like to tell you of an example of such liberation. I had a boy of 17 coming from an agnostic family with high ideals, attaching their idealism chiefly to disarmament and birth control. Our boys were building a hut for a tinker's family with four children, who had always lived under canvas in winter and summer. The hut was due to be finished in December. He came to me just before it was completed:

"I quite enjoy the building, but why select these people to benefit from this enterprise? I have seen the slums of London, the living conditions of the poor are terrible in all overcrowded cities, and what does the relief we might be giving here really mean in comparison with the vastness of the housing problem? It is just a drop in an ocean of misery."

I felt helpless in the face of such cool reasoning. Some days later, the eldest daughter of the tinker's family was taken away to hospital, dangerously ill. The child recovered and came back for the first time in her life to sleep in a home with a roof over her head. The boy witnessed the homecoming, the parents' joy and the child's sense of relief and safety. He came to me and said: "Now I know what it is all about." He had experienced great compassion.

I maintain that without exercise of the Samaritan virtues compassion cannot survive today. Cruelty is rare in England: callousness is everywhere. The young, before the war, were losing the power of deep affection. The children in the nursery were still unbroken in their humanity, but in adolescence their emotions tended to be frittered away in intense and shallow sensations. They no longer taste to the full either joy or sorrow. Their quick radio ears and quick cinema eyes listen and look everywhere, ever impatient for a change of scene. Even the tenderness of family life suffers. Great anxiety, even bereavements, is swallowed in the confused restlessness of their daily life.

*The revolutionary reform to come will have to go far beyond the realm of instruction. It will rescue youth at school and youth at work from unhealthy habits of life. The young may no longer be left at the mercy of a diseased civilization. We must restore to them the sources of human strength.*

\*\*\*

From the  
King's Message on Empire Youth Sunday, 1943

*"The Queen and I send our best wishes to all the young people observing Empire Youth Sunday. They are meeting the difficulties and dangers of wartime with a spirit that we continually admire. As Patron of Empire Youth Sunday I am glad that on this anniversary they are giving expression to their sense of unity with their fellow members of the great family of the British Commonwealth, and are together dedicating themselves anew to the tasks of the present and the world-wide responsibilities that they will share after the war."*

**II**  
**EMPIRE YOUTH SUNDAY**

It is fitting that the young of the Empire should foregather today. Let us render thanks for a glorious victory, let us ask God's blessing on the events that are being fashioned in Washington at this moment. Let us pray that we may not fail after our enemies are finally vanquished.

Will Britain prove herself deserving of the triumph of her might? You may think this will wholly depend on the wisdom and goodness of your rulers. They will determine the settlement of peace, they will mete out punishment and reward, they will shape the social reform meant to right many wrongs.

I regard it as my task today to prove to you that your spirit and your citizenship are of importance. It will depend also on you whether or not our rulers will keep faith with the men who have given their lives, convinced of the sacredness of our cause.

This is my first proof:

It is a matter almost of common consent that the final settlement should not be made at once at the conclusion of hostilities for it will take years before the passions of conflict will have cooled down, and before statesmanship has a chance to operate in fairness and in calm. By that time, you will have grown to the full stature of womanhood and manhood.

My second proof:

The support of the young gives a peculiar strength to the political leaders of a country. When a man in authority does wrong, who does he least like to encounter? The young, whom are entrusted in his care. On the other hand, when they have faith in him, it is often

like a good wind behind a weary runner. Hitler is passionately concerned at this moment about maintaining the belief of the German young in himself and in his leadership. We can register it today as one of the hopeful signs that what he calls his magic spring of renewal is drying up. The young are beginning to turn away from him.

Pétain would never have surrendered in 1940 if the youth of France had been eager and expectant, hardened and devoted. We can go nearer home. In August 1938 we left Czechoslovakia to the mercies of Hitler. I am not discussing whether or not Neville Chamberlain had any other choice in our then state of unpreparedness. But I maintain he would have blushed at the mere thought of announcing that he brought “peace with honour” if the spirit of the young had been then what, thank God, it is today. In 1938 the young for a great part were unenlightened, uninterested, and unready. They knew and cared little about people who lived so far away.

My third proof:

In any international crisis the world will always ask: “Is England in earnest?” And the answer to this question will in no small degree be determined by the condition of the young men in their twenties. They will bear the heaviest burden of the conflict, theirs is the fiercest struggle and suffering; they will bring the supreme sacrifice before all others.

It becomes a matter of vital military importance whether it takes a few months or a year to turn a young citizen into a soldier. In 1938, the young of this country were for a large part not fit and not trained. We only escaped disaster by a miracle of transformation. This miracle was wrought by the Anti-Christ and the challenge he threw out, and by Britain’s answer, which he did not expect. The English and Welsh and Scotch called out their hereditary virtues. These virtues had survived a diseased civilization and an educational system which offered no protection.

I use the word miracle on purpose—Let us render thanks for such miracles, but to bank on them is blasphemy.

I hope I have proved to you that the young, and their citizenship, exercise some influence on the conduct of public affairs.

Now, I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not encouraging youth to be arrogant. On the contrary, I am convinced that it takes a lifetime to discover a measure of truth, to cure one’s prejudices, to light the spark of wisdom in one’s soul. But I would also warn you against being docile. Be careful in gathering evidence, careful and persistent and somewhat distrustful towards statements specially prepared for the public. I had a boy once who burst into my room after Russia in ’39 had invaded Poland, “Why did I never hear of the Curzon line?” My advice to him was, “You, as a citizen of a free country, must not only speak the truth, but demand the truth from your Government.”

But, while you still have a great deal to learn before you can usefully join in the discussion of details of political practice, you have made certain first principles your

own, which you should defend against all corners. They have been revealed to us all as it were by providence. You have this advantage over your elders, you have received the revelation on the threshold of manhood and womanhood, at the most impressionable age; you will never forget, and you should help older minds to remember. I am referring to principles not taught at school, but hammered out before you on the anvil of history. Let me try to define them:

Our enemies proclaim: "Might is right."  
May our watchword be: "Might is duty."

If we had gone under in 1940, humanity would have been doomed, perhaps for a thousand years.

It is not enough to keep our present enemies weak. We must be strong enough to tempt no nation, remembering Kipling's warning, "It is wrong to put temptation in the path of any nation, for fear it should succumb and go astray."

We must not forget that some of our Allies went astray in 1939.

Britain will have to be ready to help to maintain the rule of law wherever it is broken. As H.M. The King has said in his message, "You will share world-wide responsibilities." Britain will remain the core of collective security.

Now you will ask, "If power and supremacy corrupt so many nations, how can we hope to escape corruption?"

My answer is, "As our might grows day by day, the Anti-Christ is stirring in our midst. But strong spiritual forces are in readiness to defend what he attacks. There is cause for great hope and great anxiety.

The dangers of self-deception and self-righteousness are ever lurking round the corner of victory. We can claim that we are not tempted to say as the Nazis say: "Our nation is our God." The sinister ideal of the deified nation is indeed far removed from our outlook, but are we any nearer the goal which the present Archbishop of Canterbury has put before us at the beginning of the war, the ideal of a "dedicated nation"? We have hardly passed the halfway house.

I pin my hope to the youth of the Empire. You have never been more ready to pledge yourselves to the service of Christ.

Now, it is for us to provide opportunities for such service. I am going to put a plan of youth before you. In doing this, I want you to remember that no single man is responsible for it. It has grown from the revealing experiences of this war, independently, in the minds of many men and women all over the Empire. I will call it the "Never again" plan.

Never again will youth be allowed to sink into sloth. They will go into daily training; to build up their resilience, their speed, their endurance, their strength, their resource and initiative.

Never again will youth be left at the mercy of social diseases which sap their humanity.

Never again will they be humoured in their impatience and in their slapdash. They will be schooled in early habits of skill and care. They will be tested and trained in the brotherhood of adventure and enterprise.

Never again will youth be left at the mercy of social diseases which sap their humanity.

Never again will they be humoured in their impatience and in their slapdash. They will be schooled in early habits of skill and care. They will be tested and trained in the brotherhood of adventure and enterprise.

Never again will the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm be suspended for the youth at work. “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He restoreth my soul.”

The young between sixteen and eighteen—whether at school or at work—will have the chance of an annual training holiday, long enough to restore them.

Never again shall the Samaritan services you have rendered during the war fade out of your plan of life.

The King has thanked you and you have deserved this honour. I am thinking of Sea Scouts, in the Isle of Wight, of the St. John Ambulance Brigades everywhere, the Service Squads in the Liverpool blitz, the Sea Cadets, the Cadets and A.T.C., the young Home Guards, the dispatch riders in Cardiff, the Young Watchers on the Morayshire Coast. I am recalling what happened only a few nights ago, when fire-watching boys saved a Cathedral by their vigilance and promptness. Throughout the country the young are ready, not only for self-sacrifice, but for the drudgery of meticulous drills. In this war, we adults have learned two lessons about the young:

The first lesson: The young between the ages of sixteen and eighteen have a sharpness of sight and hearing, a certain readiness of reaction which is superior to that of the child, and to that of the adult. It is wrong not to use it, both in your interest and for the service you can render to the community.

The second lesson: The young need not be *compelled* to serve; they will never fail to respond provided they are given the opportunity for relevant service. There is no need to say to them, “You must”; it is enough to say, “You may.” It is more impressive when free men rally than when slaves muster.

We must translate these lessons into action and give two pledges to the young before the war ends.

The first pledge: In peace time also you will be used in danger and in need.

The second pledge: Your schools and your workshops will release enough of your time and strength to allow you to go into serious training for the special services which you choose.

The training syllabus for such services is already worked out by important public bodies; by the St. John Ambulance; by the Home Office for the National Fire Service; by the Board of Trade for H.M. Coast Guards. But from all these authorities you will only receive technical instruction; you may carry them out to the letter with efficiency and punctiliousness, and yet the Samaritan spirit may never have been kindled within you.

“He who does not love men will not know God.”

May your power of compassion come into action from early childhood onwards.

May the tenderness of family life strengthen your sovereign sympathy.

May you study your countryside, your borough and your village, the habits and traditions which surround you; may you know and love your roots.

Burke has truly said:

“To be attached to the sub-division, to love the little platoon, is the first principle, the germ as it were of publick affections—the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love of our country and mankind.”

I am envisaging a training plan for the whole youth of the Empire. It should present certain standard tests both in athletics and swimming, but in addition, it should offer two all-important openings or “gaps”—one for the individual, bidding him to complete a project of his own choice in accordance with his natural aptitude, and a second “gap” into which the various regions are invited to pour their proud contribution, in conformity with geographical opportunities and historical traditions.

I am thinking of the great heritage of the African child, dance and folklore. I am thinking of the hunting expedition with the 1,000 year old throwing stick, in the Sudan, Wales’ wonderful music naturally comes to my mind.

I remember the sailing skill, as it still lives in the Shetlands and the Orkneys, and the Fell Race in Cumberland. But all these activities are only the prelude. They are the preparation of body, spirit, and will for the vital test of the training plan: recognized Samaritan service presented in great variety for your choice. Everywhere there are national treasures to be guarded, treasures preserved by the National Trust, treasures of bird and plant life, treasures to be reclaimed from barren land. But the most sacred treasure of all is human life. And there are no better watchers than the young.

I have a vision of a great rally after the war—a gathering of trained youth all on active service for Peace—they will come by the hundred thousand from all parts of our great Commonwealth, groups of boys and girls, from the hills and the sea, from the plain, and the great cities, each bearing witness in their dress, in their bearing, their training, their performance, to their traditional heritage. My hope is that there will be many thousands of Watchers among them, who have all signed the Watcher's pledge:

*“I promise to serve my village and this district, through them my King and country, and Christ through all.”*