It is an immense privilege once more to preach at St Mary's ,Warwick on the occasion of our annual Regimental service. I wonder if you recall these words of mine last time.
'The Prime Minister said in an interview for BFBS last Friday that fighting in Afghanistan is very, very tough, and he promised all the equipment needed by local commanders to complete a vital mission. The Commanding General in response asked for helicopters in hours. I would ask also for dedicated hospitals, armoured troop carriers that were fit for purpose, body armour, and thousands of troops from NATO allies that sign agreements and then do not keep them, and then , Prime Minister, I would ask for our Battalions back'.
That was three years ago. The Prime Minister then was Mr Blair. It is only recently that his successor Gordon Brown has promised new helicopters. The very same 'new' helicopters. Next Spring.
And in the meantime we have buried our dead.
You know the story of armoured vehicles. The requests to NATO allies for them to put their troops in harms way. The lack of response.
And in the meantime we have buried our dead.

I said then that defence spending as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product was smaller than it was in the 1930's and look at the catastrophe that policy generated. Over the last three years defence spending as a proportion of GDP has fallen again whilst the political spin suggests the opposite. Today we hear that all Territorial Army training is to be cancelled for six months to save twenty million pounds. So much for respect for a soldier's training. In fact all political parties are promising further cuts after the trillions spent to save the banks. Up to thirty per cent each, in fact. Some investment.
And in the meantime …..we have buried our dead.

I have been greatly moved by the Fusilier families who lost a son or a brother or a husband in these last tumultuous weeks. Their bearing in the last five funeral services graced by the Vollies and other military honours was an inspiration, as was the committed and respectful attendance of members of the Regiment who heeded the call to support them.

I suppose it all boils down to a matter of identity.

My identity must be that of a Christian Priest. Two weeks ago I was invited to preach at St Michael's Church Abergele on Saint Michael's Day or Michaelmas as we once would all have known it by. It is a celebration of angels. They had spent the last year marking the founding of their Church by Saint Elfod 1200 years ago. Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists, Baptists and all sorts had gathered for this unique occasion. Most of the service was in Welsh, and try as I may, the Lord did not answer my prayer to be given the gift of tongues to be able to speak the language of the angels, so they had to put up with a Brummie. I was invited to preach because as a Residentiary Canon of Ripon Cathedral, I had been part of the 1300th Anniversary Celebrations of our founding Saint Wilfrid which actually culminates today. Not much is known of Elfod. He is the Patron Saint for the elimination of foreign objects, presumably the English! But we do know he was Archbishop of Gwynedd and was able to change the Calendar of the Welsh Church to

share the same date as the Church in Rome. Ripon's Saint Wilfrid had done the same for the Saxon Church. What most people now do not realise is how very profound that was for us today. The Welsh Church was gathered in Llans, like the Scottish word 'Clan'. Communities sprung up around a Church to live the Christian life. The early Saints from the Sixth Century built more than Churches. They built a country and a way of life based on Christian belief. They laid the foundation of our modern European civilization, and they suffered for it. Wilfrid braved assassination attempts, imprisonment and worse and kept bouncing back for more as he converted thousands. His cause was worthy of his sacrifice. And the matter of Christian identity is this. Elfod's Abergele Church is older than Wales as a political entity, and Wilfrid's Ripon founded in AD672 is older than England. Despite wars, civil wars, invasions, changes of government, political systems, language and custom, worshippers across the ages at those Churches have shared in an identity as Christians older than patriotism. We may be Welsh, we may be English, but apart from such fleeting differences, what brings us together in identity is older than millennia. When I celebrate the Eucharist in Ripon I am standing in the Tradition or 1350 years of unbroken Christian identity. That is my identity. And it is from this Tradition that I offer my ministry and understand what I am about.

The Taliban are very clear indeed about their identity. They know precisely what they desire in a cause worthy of their sacrifice. And the insurgents and terrorist murderers who have so distorted and poisoned the graceful and peaceful religion of Islam, they know their identity. They know what they want to achieve. The black flag of a caliphate above 10 Downing Street for us for a start.

But what about our identity? Our soldiers are bravely fighting, taking casualties and losing their lives for a cause that when interviewed they really believe in. They have transformed the situation in Afghanistan which no-one has ever conquered, in opening schools for girls and making it possible for the Afghans to really own their own country. Our forces have also kept the fight away from our shores. But there is a debate at home about the mission, and part of the confusion is that the politicians have yet to articulate a cause. And they have to demonstrate that the Treasure of the land is fully available to support our forces. They have yet to prove their identity as effective leaders, as people who in reality can define and support the mission, and as people worthy of asking soldiers to make any sacrifice. Yet as it is not Armies that fight wars, but countries, our own society is having to redefine itself. Our country has to be worthy of those five Fusiliers who have recently laid down their lives for us. Our country has to demonstrate and embrace such a quality of living and civilization that it is worth a drop of a soldier's blood. Are we worthy of a single fallen young soldier's life? And so politicians as the leaders of the nation have to articulate a vision greater than that of taking and holding power for the sake of party or themselves. And their vision must involve us all and it must be a moral vision. At the heart of our nation must be a community worth dying for, and I think we fail that test. It is for all of us to discover our true identity when a struggling economy has failed to produce the morality and compassion of a worthy society. So it is not just the Church which is off message and irrelevant to reflect on its role. It is not just politicians as they position themselves before what promises to be a nasty divisive and dividing election seemingly for their own benefit to consider deeper

values; it is for all of us to examine ourselves and make a change. Make a difference. Reflect on the value of our own lives. Many have died for us and we owe them better.

A soldier's identity is to do his or her duty for the Queen and for our country, and in reality for your mates and the safety of all at home. Friendship takes on a depth of meaning in those situations which many cannot comprehend, including the politicians who order the action and yet have had no personal experience or comprehension of conflict. It was General Robert E Lee, the most revered of all American Commanders despite his leadership of the losing Confederate side who said "A good soldier is someone who loves the Army". He was someone who loved and cared a great deal for the soldiers under his command. But he also said that a good Commander must be someone who orders the death of that which he loves, of his army. That sacrifice is determined by the rightness of the cause. Lee spent the night he was offered the command of the Union forces pacing up and down in his Arlington house. But in the end he could not raise his sword against what he considered to be his own country, the State of Virginia, and he left home to fight, never to return. He was not a slave owner. He was fighting for his State. After defeat his property was confiscated to become what it is now, Arlington National Cemetery. But he had a cause he considered to be worthy.

Finally, we have to consider the identity of Almighty God, and surprisingly it is not as an omnipotent supreme Being who can magic pain and suffering away at the flick of a finger. That would mean our moral annihilation if we are no longer responsible for our actions, and would defy His true reality as a God who suffers. A vulnerable God. Who saw His Son die on a Cross, another young man who died for a cause when He should not have been killed. A Son killed by the same capacity for human evil that we see choking and corrupting our world today. But He came to save us by pointing out a better way of living, putting on God's armour, and wearing it to overcome our real enemies. And His armour? Truth, integrity, peace, faith, salvation and the gift of the Spirit. And prayer, the ability to keep watch and persevere. We like God are vulnerable and suffer, but we can overcome evil by having qualities inside us which are God given, qualities that give us life, the qualities gifted to us by Our Lord who gave His life for us…..but came back in power and triumph. Not for the first time our nation has to face the fact that to overcome an enemy you have to have the moral integrity of a just cause to win.

Sermon by Canon Keith Punshon
11th October 2009