

## Remembrance

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.

Those famous lines taken from Laurence Binyon's poem *For the Fallen*, written in September 1914 are familiar to all of us and those last four words, "We will remember them" are the driver and the heart of our remembrance commemorations up and down the country.

That we should remember seems to me self-evident but, as seems to happen every year, there is, once again, a public debate about the value of remembrance with some politicians saying that remembrance serves to somehow glorify war and to celebrate it. Some tell us that we shouldn't wear our poppies with pride or that if we do wear them then they should be white so that we can make a political statement about our opposition to war.

Now I don't know about you but I have yet to meet anyone who is not automatically opposed to war. War and the systematic killing of other people is an outcome that is always a last resort and the day that we enter into it with enthusiasm is surely the day that we have lost the right to call ourselves civilised. This is such a fundamental tenet of our society, a belief reinforced by our Christian faith and underlined by the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Remembrance is not a denial of that belief. It is not a glorification of war. It is rather, a recognition of the sacrifice of others made on our behalf and a celebration of their humanity in that sacrifice. It is also the key to underpinning our belief in the futility and pointlessness of war. It is the reminder of what can go wrong when we end up at that last resort and as such it is a vital part of our society and the surest way to ensure peace for the future. So to those who urge us to forget our remembrance, I would simply say that for the good of the future – we will remember them.

100 years ago, this country was just over one year in to the bloodiest and most terrible war in memory. In the year 1915 alone we had the continuing nightmare of the Western Front flaring into bloody life at the battles of Neuve Chapelle and the 2<sup>nd</sup> battle of Ypres. As if that were not bad enough, we had the disastrous campaign in the Dardanelles and the slaughter of Gallipoli.

In the coming year of 1916 we would have two of the defining battles of the war at Verdun and at the Somme. At Verdun the French and Germans fought themselves to a standstill to effectively gain no ground and yet that battlefield consumed 550,000 French soldiers and 440,000 Germans – almost a million men. To put that into context, that is equivalent to the entire current population of Cheshire.

At 7.30am on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916, a series of huge explosions were set off along the Western Front beside the river Somme and 150,000 thousand British troops filed out of their trenches and steadily walked towards German lines which they had been assured were destroyed by weeks of bombing. They were not. By the end of just that first day of the battle of the Somme, one in every three of those British soldiers had been killed or injured. There were 57,400 casualties, 19,200 of whom had been killed – the worst single day in the history of the British army. Again, to put it into context, that casualty number is equivalent to half the population of Chester – in one day of fighting.

The battle of the Somme raged on inexorably for another four and a half months. At the end of it, the Allies had pushed the German line back by 7 miles. The cost in terms of lives was truly shocking with combined British and French losses of 620,000 and a further 465,000 Germans.

These battles, at Ypres, Gallipoli, Verdun and the Somme remain fresh in the public consciousness and I, for one fervently hope and pray that that will remain the case for the next 100 years. There is no one now living who took part in the Great War and it will not be long before we say the same about the conflict in 1939 to 1945. The onus on us to keep alive the memories of these events is enormous. It is only by looking at the past that we learn lessons for the future.

For that reason, it is wonderful to come in to church this morning and see the beautiful remembrance display created by the Bunbury cubs. They were inspired by the amazing installation at the Tower of London, “Bloodswept lands and Seas of Red” by the artists Paul Cummins and Tom Piper. I’m sure that you all saw it – either in person or on the television. It consisted of 888,246 ceramic poppies cascading over the walls and into the moat of the Tower. Each poppy represented a British life lost in the Great War.

The wonderful thing about the installation for me was that 4 million people went along to see it and many millions more saw it on television, making it probably the biggest act of remembrance in history. It’s inspired so many other acts of remembrance like the beautiful one we have here in church and through that ensures the ongoing remembrance that is so vital to the future peace of this country.

The overriding memory of the Great War is one of amazing self-sacrifice. It’s a self-sacrifice that we find hard to understand today but one that is rooted in our Christian faith. The ultimate sacrifice of Christ on the cross was a sure belief, foundation and comfort for the men who marched to their deaths in Flanders fields. The knowledge that their

sacrifice would save their country and their loved ones drove them on and nowhere is that better captured for me than in Marjorie Pickthall's poem, *Marching Men*.

*Under the level winter sky  
I saw a thousand Christs go by  
They sang an idle song and free  
As they went up to Calvary*

*Careless of eye and coarse of lip  
They marched in holiest fellowship  
That heaven might heal the world, they gave  
Their earth born dreams to deck the grave*

*With souls unpurged and steadfast breath  
They supped the sacrament of death  
And for each one, far off, apart  
Seven swords have rent a woman's heart*

It is increasingly difficult in our modern world to understand that concept of total sacrifice. We live in an increasingly self centred society where looking after number one seems to be the driving mantra and yet even now, we can look around and see that the example of Christ's sacrifice continues to drive enough people to give us hope for the future.

The sacrifice of our military did not end in 1918. It continued through the awful conflict in 1939 to 1945 and in many conflicts since, most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan. These most recent wars have reminded people of the debt that we owe to those that pay the ultimate price in life and limb to ensure our security. Society's recognition of that debt is reflected in the growth of charities like 'Help for Heroes' and the rise in contributions to the Royal British Legion's poppy campaign.

But sacrifice has not just been limited to members of the armed forces. We heard this week the wonderful news that Sierra Leone has, at last, been declared free from Ebola. This was only possible by the astonishing self-sacrifice of thousands of British doctors and nurses. When I spoke on Easter Sunday, I recounted the story of Dr Natalie McDermott, a young doctor who over the past 2 years has put her life at risk not once but three times to work to combat the Ebola Crisis in Liberia.

Dr McDermott is a Christian who heard the call of God and responded in the only way she knew. This was right at the start of the outbreak when there were no facilities available to repatriate health workers in the UK . As she put it herself,

"I knew it was where God wanted me to be and though this might sound crazy to many, for me it was simple – if I didn't volunteer, along with the many others, this epidemic was going to be completely out of control before the world woke up to it. I could not sit knowing what was developing – and the level of suffering involved – and not act."

"I knew the risk I was taking. I knew medical evacuation in the context of Ebola was, at that time, essentially impossible. I knew if I contracted Ebola while working in Liberia I would likely die a painful and lonely death"

And yet she went as a member of the Christian charity Samaritan's Purse.. She went because she felt it was her Christian duty. She went because she knew Christ's sacrifice for her was absolute and that her responsibility was a willingness to make that same sacrifice for others.

As she put it herself, "Yes I am taking a risk, but it is a risk worth taking for those who are suffering and for the good of our world. I would rather risk my life and possibly lose it doing what I believe is right, than sit at home in safety regretting my inaction. After all as the missionary Jim Elliott once wrote 'he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose'."

It is this recognition that ultimately, our lives are a gift from God and that they should be used for good that drives such sacrifice and it is this sacrifice that we remember today and I pray we will remember forever. 100 years ago this was captured succinctly in the words of the poet A E Houseman...

Here dead we lie  
Because we did not choose  
To live and shame the land  
From which we sprung.

Life, to be sure,  
Is nothing much to lose,  
But young men think it is,  
And we were young.

Let us pray.

Lord we give you thanks for the sacrifice of your Son, Our Lord, Jesus Christ that has inspired through the generations and continues to inspire today.

We give thanks for the lives laid down in sacrifice in war and peace and pray that Your Spirit will remain with us now and always.

We ask this in Jesus name. Amen

**Tom Crotty**