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| **Remembrance**  **11 November 2012** | | |
|  | It is good that we are gathered here this morning. It is good that we are gathered together across the generations to remember those known to us and those unknown, those whose lives have been given and taken away in conflict. Our collective memory and our desire to keep their memory alive is a sacred thread that unites us all.    We will remember them.    Today will mean something different for each one of us. Some of us are older, some of us younger, and yet each one of us will have our own cherished memories or stories of loved ones. Take the opportunity to share them with family and friends after the service at home over lunch or at the pub over a pint – don’t forget the stories that make you smile, but treasure them, and pass them on to the next generation.    Today I remember Uncle Ron. He was among the paratroopers dropped over Arnhem on Day One of the battle immortalised in the film A Bridge Too Far.  Ron barely spoke of that day, or of his other experiences of the war. It was too painful. But two years before he died, he gave my parents-in-law the official painting of the bridge presented to all taking part in that drop. It now hangs in pride of place in their home. This painting is important to us. It’s important because it reminds us of how many people gave their lives on that day. But it’s also important because Ron trusted us with memories that were precious to him.  Ron generally preferred to stay on the outskirts of family life, sometimes uncomfortable about joining us at family celebrations. But in giving us his painting, in entrusting his unspoken memories to us, he signified that we were family to him. It is easy to look at a memorial or a roll of honour and forget that behind every name there is a story, a family, a wife, a husband, a mother, a father - those who mourn.    We will remember them.    Today we remember those who served in the First World War. We who were not there cannot imagine what those young men experienced, but perhaps a soldier from a later generation captures something of their feelings when he  writes,    ‘We went to war because it was our duty. That is one kind of love. Another and far more transcendent love came to us unbidden on the battlefields as it does on every battlefield man has ever fought. We discovered in that depressing, hellish place, where death was our constant companion, that we loved each other. We killed for each other, we died for each other, and we wept for each other. And in time we came to love each other as brothers. In battle our world shrank to the man on our left and the man on our right and the enemy all around. We held each other’s lives in our hands, and we learned to share our fears, our hopes, our dreams, as readily as we shared what little else good came our way.'    All veterans from the First World War have now died - Florence Green, who served as a mess steward at RAF bases in Marham and Narborough died in February aged 110.    We will remember them.    Today we remember those who served in the Second World War and later I will be performing a blessing at Peckforton for an RAF family, one member Kenneth Pay, flew and survived an incredible 64 missions as part of Bomber Command. For those young pilots, it was bravery that drove them to climb into their aircraft for sortie after sortie, knowing what was waiting. I suspect only a few of us here will be able to imagine what they felt, what they experienced. They speak of the overwhelming sense of physical and emotional exhaustion during the battle - and yet they kept going.    Squadron Leader, Geoffrey Wellum writes in ‘First Light’: ‘In most lives, I suppose there comes a time when one has to make a supreme effort that calls for every morsel of more and more endeavour. With me I am certain that my time came as an operational fighter pilot in our country’s finest hour.  I had reached the pinnacle of my life before the age of 22. But I grieve for my lost friends in the Squadron.’    Today we will remember them.    And then there are those who have returned from battle, but never to be the same. Whether they are physically, mentally or emotionally different, and the strain that has caused for their loved ones- we must remember those in uniform and their families are human beings too. And so we give thanks for the members of the Royal British Legion, and their continued support for disadvantaged ex-service people and their families. And at this point I would like to make mention of one of their members, Jonnie Walker, who served in the Desert Rats and was in action at both battles of El Alamein in Egypt. He also served in Italy, and after re equipping in the UK, he was one of the brave men who landed in Normandy on D-Day. During his service John Walker was wounded three times, and on recovering from his wounds he rejoined his battalion on each occasion. The first time he was discharged from a Casualty Clearing Station he marched in the desert for five days looking for his battalion, looking for his friends and brothers.    Today we will remember them.    And then of course there is today’s Armed Forces who continue to risk life and limb in the service of this nation, and who continue to find the inner strength to do what is needed to be done, despite everything that is stacked up against them.    Colonel Robert Thompson, of the 2nd Batallion, The Rifles, said after the deaths of 8 servicemen in Afghanistan:  ‘As the sun slipped behind the ridge, we turned to the right, saluted the fallen and wounded, picked up our rifles and returned to the ramparts. I sensed each rifleman, tragically killed in action, standing behind us as we returned to our posts and we all know that each one of those riflemen would have wanted us to crack on and that is what we shall do.   There will be no turning, the work is too important; we are undeterred but we will miss each of our fallen riflemen sorely. They lived and fought alongside us. Our lives are much worse for them not being here but we can celebrate what they were and what they achieved. We are so very proud of them. And yet, in all of this we know that our grief is nothing compared to that of their loved ones and it is them we also hold in our thoughts and prayers and ask that they may somehow find strength and courage to face the days ahead.’    Today we will remember them.    But today is also about hope. That’s why some of us wear poppies - a flower that has come powerfully to symbolise hope in the midst of death, and our hope comes not from denying death, and the pain that it causes. Rather, our hope, Christian hope comes from the fact that love is stronger than death, light more powerful than darkness, the poppy more resilient than the killing fields.    In Jesus Christ, the very life of God put on the uniform of our humanity. He went to the cross and suffered some of the worst that humanity has ever invented and knows that peace is neither easy nor cheap.  But he conquered death once and for all, so that those who have died in conflict are now at peace: free from war, free from suffering, free from pain. They abide with Christ in love.    And as for us, until that time when nation no longer rises against nation, and the sword is finally beaten to a ploughshare, let us strengthen our resolve to remember those who have paid the ultimate price and given their lives for peace and for us. Our love and respect for them will never die. We will treasure their stories, we will cherish their memories and we will pray for all those who still risk everything in the cause of justice and peace.    We will remember them.    **Tim** |  |