

Remembrance Sunday 2022

We reach another milestone of our year, today with our commemoration of the lives of those lost in conflict, particularly those lost in the 20th century – First and Second World Wars.

But, to reduce our remembrance to those two conflicts alone, and we could be forgiven for doing that as our War Memorials and Book of Remembrance are dedicated to those lost in those two wars; would be to ignore the fact that since 1945 there have been a further 7,190 (MOD report March 2021) personnel killed in operations that UK Armed Forces have engaged in.

So, why do we bother to remember the fallen? Why do we continue to mark this day so solemnly, to read out the names of those from this Parish who fell, to wear our poppies with pride and, of course, we may well ask where is God in all of this loss, pain and devastation.

In almost all communities, schools, banks, railway depots and parish churches can be found boards, brasses and books, bearing the names of men who died in The Great War and The Second World War. Dutifully and beautifully inscribed by those left behind and now, the names outlasting those left bereaved, ones who did grow old, age wearied by the passage of life, faithfully continuing to honour their fallen comrades, reliving battles fought in sweat soaking nightmares, unable to speak about experiences too horrifying to recount, remembering them as the sun went down and again in the morning til their lives end.

You may argue that recording and remembering those who have gone before is futile if we continue this destructive cycle, but I would counter that by saying that it is in fact a way of keeping track with Remembrance's habit of popping up in less expected places. To record the name of one who will themselves never read it is a participation in the cycle of mourning, remembering and, yet - crucially – still living in which all of us must partake. In this sense, participation in the rituals of Remembrance represents the ultimate faith in an arc that looks to the future and which necessarily bends towards resurrection.

When the bugler plays *The Last Post*, it is a call that is less a summons to action than a desolate echo of war. War speaks of disintegration; war blows apart nations, alliances and human lives. In the Book of Revelation which we are currently working through in the lectionary this month, the fifth angel's trumpet from chapter 9, announces destruction and torment not unlike that experienced by soldiers in the trenches of the Great War. The sky is darkened with smoke from the bottomless pit and locusts inflict pain of such intensity that their victims wish only to die. The people of earth hurtle towards disintegration.

Remembrance Day and Remembrance Sunday are less about 'remembering' than 're-memorizing', an attempt to reassemble pieces blown apart by war and make

some sense of them and at its root lies a desire for wholeness, peace and wellbeing. But re-remembering leads to re-integration only when set against a backdrop of New Creation in Christ.

In Malachi we read of promises of healing after a time of conflict. In Luke, Jesus prophesies war and oppression at the beginning of the end-time. Sandwiched in between Paul is warning his followers to keep away from believers who are living in idleness. Paul shaped his language with precision. The word he uses for “idleness” is *ataktos*, the same word root that has given us “tactics” and “tactical”; and that is not surprising because it is a military word, mainly used by the Greeks to refer to disorderly and unsoldierly, behaviour. If you return to the first sentence of the reading “Now we command you”, you discover that that too is a military one.

Paul repurposes military language to make a point. We might find that surprising and question whether it is appropriate. There are other examples of its use too – Paul “fights the good fight” although right at the moment when he has surrendered without a fight to his soon-to-be executioners. Having urged the value of peace on the Ephesians, he then has to stir them to a form of warfare – not the physical variety, but dangerous nevertheless. And then of course, my favourite Bible verse from Ephesians 6.13-17: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the whole armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes”. Military metaphors for speaking of the battle between forces of good and evil.

Soldiering can be a noble vocation. That applies to both metaphorical soldiering like Paul and Jesus allude to as well as literal soldering. In the West we talk of fighting “just wars”, the *notion that the resort to armed force (jus ad bellum) is justified under certain conditions*; a concept first articulated by St Augustine in Roman times and developed over the centuries. The concept of the just fight seems to be deeply ingrained in our psyche, we hate nasty brutish oppressors, the underdog which probably explains our almost automatic support for Ukraine in its fight to free their homeland from foreign invasion and the tyranny of Putin’s Russia, winning our admiration for their courageous and ongoing sacrifices, praying that they will be victorious although the cost will be enormous and it is terrifying watching the war unfold on our tv screens.

As we read ‘the little apocalypse’ in our Lukan passage, we may well think that it’s all very well for Jesus to say “do not be terrified”, but the things he lists here are frankly terrifying. There has scarcely been a time between the day he said these words and our own when there have not been wars and insurrections, nations rising against nations and the even more dreadful civil wars and religious strife that splits nations and families asunder and where intimacy is broken by persecution and betrayal. Good reason then for us to be terrified.

What Jesus is calling for is a kingdom vision that takes us through and beyond terror, a vision that meets terror with trust, faith and endurance. We can only rise to this if we rest and trust in the promise of life: the promise that even those who have met with death are alive to God, the God of the living; the promise that, in the final reckoning and new life inaugurated by the coming kingdom, we will indeed find that not a hair on our head has perished.

In light of the resurrection gospel, we can discover, even in the chaos around us, even in persecution, not oppression, but what Jesus calls a 'gift' of 'opportunity to testify'. What we testify to, is the final triumph of Love, the final radiance of a light that no darkness can comprehend or extinguish.

The Revelation of St John foretells that, when death and life are no more, there will be presented to God a book: a book of names and deeds; a book of remembrance. So, during this Remembrance season, perhaps we should leaf through the accounts of our war dead, in sure and certain knowledge of the resurrection promised by that Book of Life.

And the reassurance we read from Malachi is that God's judgement is the only one that matters, and those dealings will be fair and gracious in the hands of the One who loves us so much that he gave his only Son. Gave him in the ultimate battle against the forces of evil, the tyranny of the devil. Love, not fear, is the heart of our faith and is therefore what we need to embody today in our words and actions.

From Christ they inherit a home of unfading splendour, wherein they rejoice with gladness evermore.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.
Amen