

WEEKLY SERMON

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A few moments to remember so much sacrifice

*“Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.”
Luke 21.10a*

In recent days many of us will have stood, more or less, to attention; playing our part in the National Act of Remembrance.

The eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month and the same time on the nearest Sunday to it has over the years become totemic and is burned into our national psyche.

As have all the other rituals associated with Remembrance: the intoning of the fourth verse of Laurence Binyon’s poem, ‘For the Fallen’; the standing erect as the Last Post is sounded; listening to the silence that falls over the country for two minutes, all whilst thinking of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. Then Reveille sounding and life resuming its normal, hectic pace.

It comes as rather a shock to visit other countries and discover how radically different some of their rituals of remembrance can be.

Unlike most traditions, our rich tapestry wasn’t assembled over a prolonged period. Rather, it was carefully considered, planned and assembled, much of it whilst the Great War was still raging.

Similar attention to detail was paid to the design of the war cemeteries: the iconic headstones, the memorials, the poppies. The ritual has remained virtually unchanged for over a century; only the Kohima Epitaph was added after the Second World War.

All this was done with the twin aims of remembering the sacrifice the country had been through – and ensuring that it never happened again.

In the military I was always taught that a twin aim – a split mission to use the correct jargon – is usually a recipe for failure. I’d argue that that may have happened here. The first aim – to remember the horror of the First World War has been achieved; I might go so far as to say, over-achieved.

Meanwhile the second – preventing further wars – has been a miserable failure. ‘The War to end War’ (as HG Wells described it) has been anything but. Wars have proliferated and people have continued to die. The National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire is dominated by the Armed Forces Memorial on which the names of all those killed in conflict since 1945 are engraved – the names of over 16,000 men and women in over 50 separate operations.

Perhaps it’s not that surprising. Jesus himself told us that war and insurrection would be pretty well endemic in this world of sin before He returned; nation would rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom.

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War and strife tragically seem to be an integral part of the human condition, although that shouldn't stop us doing all in our power to minimise and lessen its impact.

And who knows? One day we may succeed in eradicating it or, at the very least, its worst excesses.

Which brings me back to the first aim of those who conceived of Armistice Day – to remember the horrors of the Great War. Why did I hint that perhaps that aim had been over-achieved?

Well, put simply, it's because thoughts and images of the First World War have come so much to dominate our consciousness: whether it be the mud of Flanders; the putrid trenches; the 'lions led by donkeys'; the lone Tommy in his saucer-shaped "Tin Lid" (more correctly called the Brodie Helmet and made of steel) carrying his equally iconic Lee Enfield rifle.

All such images so dominate our culture they often overpower thoughts of more recent warfare.

Don't believe me? Well, look at the TV schedules for Freeview Channel 84 last Friday:

- 7.40 The First World War, part 10;
- 8.40 World War I – the Final Hours;
- 9.50 The Last Days of World War One, part 6.

Meanwhile, over the summer Channel 4 ran a series on "Britain's Forgotten Wars". Each episode devoted to a single conflict that had been "forgotten":

- Suez
- Korea
- Kenya
- Malaya
- more recently ...
- Gulf War 1
- the Balkan Wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo.

'Forgotten Wars' are the very opposite of 'Remembered Wars' – the very thing we're trying to achieve. These are all conflicts which are very much still alive in living memories – people still mourning the loss of their mother, father, husband, wife.

People living with the injuries they sustained, both physical and mental, on behalf of their country. People who continue to suffer. People who have a right to be remembered. People who need our help and our action.

And how long before other recent conflicts slip off our radar – out of our national consciousness? When will the Falklands Campaign, the 40th anniversary of which we marked this year, become just another "forgotten war"?

What about Gulf War 2? Afghanistan? Syria? Even Ukraine?

When will we consign those disputes to the 'forgotten' pile; whilst still remembering World War 1 in shocking and gory detail?

Can we just sit back and allow this collective amnesia?

Remembrance Sunday is a wonderful day and an institution of which we can be justifiably proud. But it's not enough. We need to remember the sacrifices made on our behalf much more frequently and do something about them.

Why can't we devote a few moments of our thoughts and our prayers every single day to those who have served their country; both in and out of uniform?

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That's my challenge to us all. It's not a lot to ask, is it? Just a few moments each day for them, when they have given so much for us.

Rev David Hargreaves, Curate of Barrowford St Thomas and Newchurch-in-Pendle St Mary