

Remembrance Sunday 2018

One hundred years ago this morning at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month the First World War ended. The carnage and sacrifice was over but the suffering was still to go on. Seventeen men from this parish gave their lives in the so called, "war to end all wars". Here are a few facts:

World War 1 was triggered on 28 June 1914 by the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his pregnant wife Sophie

WW1 included the first known use of chemical weapons (mustard Gas)

The sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 bought the US into the war

US entered the war on April 6, 1917

65 million troops were mobilized during WW1

more than 9 million troops died

more than 21 million troops were wounded

58,000 British soldiers were lost on the first day at the Battle of the Somme

By the end of the war there were 250,000 wounded British soldiers who suffered total or partial amputation

The U.S. was in the war in actual combat for only seven and a half months during which time 116,000 were killed and 204,000 were wounded.

During the course of the World War 1 approximately 11% of the population was killed or wounded.

Battle of Verdun, 1916, resulted in over a million casualties in ten months.

Over 200,000 men died in the trenches of WW1

Trenches were infested with millions of rats, frogs and lice

80,000 British troops suffered from shell-shock

Remember Ypres, the Somme, Mons, and Verdun. Remember the Western Desert, El Alamein, the Normandy beaches. Remember Dresden, Hiroshima and the Burma Road. Remember Korea, the Falkland Islands, Northern Island, Iraq, Afghanistan.

Remember the courage, the comradeship, the ingenuity, the spirit of working together for a common cause, the planning together for a better world that would come with peace.

Remember the call to arms, the patriotic songs, the posters, the partings which were such sweet sorrow, the sound of the drum, the skirl of the pipe, the prayer that God would be on our side.

Remember the carnage, the colossal, stinking, bloody horror; the ripped bodies on the wire, the platoons of which only three out of forty lived. Remember the widows, the old men and women living now who never knew their fathers. Remember the love that was lost, the wisdom wasted, the minds that were twisted and the limbs distorted.

Remember the wealth of nations being fired from guns, dropped as bombs: smashing schools, homes, factories, churches and hospitals; ruining crops, destroying trees, Remember the hope of a whole generation left to evaporate in the sands of a desert or sink forever in the oceans of the world.

Remember this day the children who will die while the world spends its wealth on arms; the young who have no work while others in their generation are trained to fight; The ambulances that will not come while we argue about how many troop carriers we need; the research into disease left neglected while brilliant minds are used to study more effective destruction.

Remember the one who asked us to remember them.

Why does Remembrance Sunday continue to flourish in the mind of the public psyche? Why was the observation of the two minutes silence on Armistice Day re-instated after so many years? The Royal British Legion has, over the years, very successfully delivered an educational campaign amongst our young people that has struck a chord with them and I am sure that we would all applaud them and continue to support their efforts. As we remember, one hundred years, on the battles of WW1 and the Armistice, the ending of the war to end all wars, so the public awareness is heightened.

As Christians we believe in peace.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.” Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, in St Matthew’s Gospel.

Today we remember all those who have died in all the wars of the last century but, particularly, WW1. We remember those 17 from this parish whose names appear on the War Memorial we walk past every time we come to this church.

George Cawston, buried in Cobham cemetery

John William Coles

John Henry Diment

Albert Gilbert

Archibald James Rowan- Hamilton

Rodolphe Willie Martin

Wilfrid John Matthews

Frederick Priestly MC

Ernest Pullen

Leonard Pullen

Arthur Mitchell Rimer, buried in our churchyard

William Russell

Frederick Archie Skilton

George Stovold

Charles Weller

William Weller

Harry Wise

We see the reality of that by looking at the silhouettes that represent them here today. They were ordinary men who answered the call to serve King and country. They were farm workers, clerks ; drawn from all classes and conditions of life.

I think we need to go back and remind ourselves where this annual commemoration came from.

“The Armistice of 11 November 1918 effectively ended the Great War, and many hoped that “all wars” had ended that day. However, the conflict was only officially concluded with the signing of the peace treaties in June 1919, and victory parades took place that summer. Yet some objected to exultant military parades, and a number of ex-servicemen even refused to participate. As a result, the first Remembrance Day ceremonies were commemorative rather than triumphant: “Today is Peace Day” announced the *Manchester Guardian* on 11 November 1919.

Remember Ypres, the Somme, Mons, and Verdun. Remember the Western Desert, El Alamein, the Normandy beaches. Remember Dresden, Hiroshima and the Burma Road. Remember Korea, the Falkland Islands, Northern Ireland, Iraq, Afghanistan.

Perhaps we need the insights of the war poets to encapsulate it all for us to describe it from the soldiers’ point of view.

Let me share with you some of their works.

“Dreamers” by Siegfried Sassoon

*“Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land,
Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives.
I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the train.”*

On Friday the boys of Parkside reminded us of the way in which they are remembering all the fallen of the wars of the last century. They came here and two moving services later, we were all very aware of the gravity of the events of the past.

This Sunday marks 100 years since the Armistice was signed in November 1918, bringing an end to the First World War.

The agreement between the Allies and a vanquished Germany required the latter to leave all occupied territories in Western Europe within two weeks and surrender 5,000 guns, 25,000 machine guns and 1,700 planes.

Big Ben sounded in Parliament Square to ring in the news as thousands gathered in Westminster and outside Buckingham Palace roaring in celebration, sparking three days of jubilation across Britain, with members

of the public climbing the lions in Trafalgar Square and tearing down advertising hoardings appealing for investment in war bonds to burn on bonfires. Remembrance Sunday is a very British thing. We are sometimes a little reticent about our role in history. Yes, reticence and bitterness. Wilfred Owen, who died close to Armistice Day, wrote in his poem *Dulce et decorum est*.

*"If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori"*

In the House of Commons, the prime minister, Lloyd George, concluded his address with the declaration: "I hope we may say that thus, this fateful morning, came an end to all wars."

The national mood was not exclusively joyous, however. Wounded veterans, recovering in military hospitals, typically met the news in reflective silence, ambivalent about the pyrrhic nature of a victory that had seen so many young lives brutally extinguished.

In Shrewsbury, Susan Owen - mother of the great poet of the conflict, Lieutenant Wilfred Owen – received a telegram informing her of his death at Sambre-Oise in France at the precise moment local church bells rang out in euphoria, an irony as bitter as they come.

A more contemporary poet who served with the Royal Marines in the Falklands campaign and Northern Ireland and in ships supplying air cover for UN troops during the Bosnia conflict and clearing mines and munitions in the Adriatic wrote;

“When there was war, God, I understood.

Now I see the small things and now I see how small the large things are.

I wonder how we will ever learn the real value of life and how small the real things are?

Peace, God, is the answer.

The large things become small and the small things become large.

When there was war, God, I understood.

Now I can begin to understand that peace, God, is the answer.”

Lest we forget.

Amen.