

2016-11-13 Sue Diggory Remembrance Sunday

On the 11th of November 1918 Private Arthur Wrench of the Seaforth Highlanders wrote in his diary: "I think it is quite hopeless to describe what today means to us. We who will return to tell people what war really is surely hope that 11 am this day will be of great significance to generations to come. Surely this is the last war that will ever be between civilised nations."

How wrong he was, the war that was supposed to end all wars we know did no such thing, for today we come here as we do every year on Remembrance Sunday, not only to worship God as we do week by week every Sunday, but to remember; to remember those who paid the ultimate price, and to honour; to honour their memory as we hear their names read once again. That familiar and unchanging list, the roll call that we hear each year, each year as we change and grow older, but as they remain the same, unchanged by the passing of the years.

We also came here on Friday with the school, children, staff, parents and governors to remember and to honour, at the 11th hour, of the 11th day of the 11th month and as part of our remembrance for the children to bring the poppy wreaths they had made, and for the older children to lay poppy crosses on our war graves, of two young men who represent both the First and Second World Wars, and just as we have done today, to stop and silently pause along with our nation, and today our Queen, to reflect and remember.

Yet this year there is I suggest a difference to our remembering here in Crockham Hill. Two weeks ago many of us gathered in the Village Garden to dedicate a memorial to the Weald House victims. To the 22 children, some as young as six months and none over the age of 5 and the 8 members of staff who lost their lives that dreadful night in June 1944 when a doodle bug struck the Weald House, the home that they had been moved to for safety, away from the dangers of life in London. We listened to the story of that terrible night, and then the names were read and we had an opportunity to remember as we stood silently, as we heard the list of names, another list of those who remain unchanged by the passing years, of those who remain the same.

Two lists of names that show the reality that war touches all and that its' victims are both those who serve in the armed forces, but also those who are innocent victims of the circumstances that surround them, the innocent and the vulnerable, child and adult alike for war is no respecter of age, and pain and suffering are borne by soldier and civilian alike, both then and now, for we only need to turn on televisions or open our newspapers to see that sadly little has changed since the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918.

It is 98 years since the Armistice was signed at the end of the First World War, and 97 years since the Cenotaph was unveiled and the Unknown Warrior was buried in Westminster Abbey. These things are part of history, but we know for millions of people since then war has not been history but a part of their lives.

In the last year alone many have died in war zones across our planet and the sad reality is that in the coming months many more will die, because we as a race have not learned lessons of the past and peace still eludes so many, and conflicts continue and all too often just as it was at Weald House that night in 1944 it is the innocent who find themselves victims of the violence that overtakes and consumes all possibility of peace, it is the innocent who are so often the victims of war, those who pay the price, and it is these that we must also remember if we are ever to live in total peace, those like the children of Aleppo who have only ever known life in a war zone.

The most visible sign of our remembrance in this country is a simple red flower, a flower that is beautifully decorating our church today, a flower that has been laid in our church yard, a flower that many of us are wearing today; it is of course the poppy. The poppy has become the symbol of the Royal British Legion, but more than that, across the world, it has come to represent sacrifice, the sacrifice made by all; those men, women and children who have given their lives in conflict.

It is not surprising that this symbol began with the death of a friend and a poem written to remember, to remember a death on the Flanders battlefield in 1915. The words are very well known and very poignant;

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard among the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields

We are told that McCrae, the author was unhappy with the poem and that he threw it aside, but one of his fellow officers found it and was so touched that he sent the poem to England where it was published in the magazine Punch. As a result, the scarlet poppy quickly became the symbol for soldiers who died in battle and by 1921 the Poppy Day Appeal had begun. The appeal that our collection taken here this morning will support, as it does each and every year.

In the Bible we read much about violence and war, especially in the pages of the Old Testament. There has probably never been a time when war has not raged somewhere in the world, so the conflicts of our own time are in one sense nothing new. Jesus himself, was born into an oppressed and occupied land, the land of Palestine, the land where he lived and died. A land that still suffers much pain today. The Jews were waiting for their king, the Messiah, and they expected him to overthrow the Roman invaders by the traditional, violent, means. Peace was not on their agenda in those New Testament times.

Yet, Jesus came and taught a gospel of peace and love. He said “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God,” and “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” Peace and love are precious commodities; they require trust, patience, tolerance, and a willingness to seek the common good and the needs of the ‘other’.

To begin to work towards peace so often needs to go hand in hand with love, a love and is self-sacrificial, a love that is willing to not look to just the needs of self, but a love that seeks to love as Christ loves, a love that wants to achieve peace, but not just ‘on my terms,’ rather a peace that come from mutual understanding and agreement, a peace that comes from true reconciliation and this is as we all know very hard to establish at every level of society. I suggest the driving force for peace must come from us, it must come from within our remembrance of those who have given their lives in war; of those injured in conflict and for their families and loved ones, of all those who carry the scars of war.

Peace will not come if we forget; it won’t happen if we wait for others to work for it. It is through our vigilance, and our prayers that peace and light will begin to emerge. The poppy wreath laid here today, the poppy crosses laid on our war graves on Friday and the flowers laid at the Weald House Memorial two weeks ago today remember much more than just those from this community who have given their lives, important though that remembering is. They are also a symbol of all, of all those who laid down their lives, of all those who daily carry the scars of war in body or mind, so today of all days let us remember that there is always the light of hope, a hope that comes through love of and faith in Jesus Christ, the one who came, and comes offering us peace, not just as the world know, but his peace, the peace that passes all understanding.

Amen