

Address at a Service of Rededication following the Addition of Names to the Leamington Spa War Memorial

During World War 1, almost a million men serving in the British armed forces were killed in action.

During World War 2, the figure reached almost 400,000.

Over 500 members of Commonwealth forces were killed during the Malaya Insurgency of 1948-1956.

These are all large, impersonal numbers; difficult to imagine, remote from our experience.

But during the years immediately after the First World War, something previously unseen in our land took place in cities, towns and villages throughout the country. Memorials such as this one were erected and inscribed with the names of the fallen. And the memorials served three very important purposes.

The first purpose was to remember the individuals. Many were brothers, cousins, friends, who signed up together and who perished together. The tragedy of war isn't about impersonal numbers; it's about local heroes and grieving families; it's about the people who were known here, in this community. People such as Privates Joseph Penn and Joseph Timms, who both died 99 years ago this month; Private Sydney Cotterill, who died on Christmas Day 1914; Aircraftsman John Warwick, who died in 1940 aged only 19; Private James Godfrey, who was killed with three others in Malaya at the age of 25, when bandits ambushed their lorry. The 18 people we commemorate today each have their own stories; they join the dozens of others, whose names are already recorded here. In every case, those poignant words are true:

'They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;
age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.'

The second purpose was to remember this great tragedy of war, which (in the case of World War 1) left virtually no community untouched; which killed one person out of every 25 in this country; which wiped out almost an entire generation of young men. In the words of the war poet Wilfred Owen - himself one of the victims - this suffering and death on a huge scale was 'the pity of war, the pity war distilled.' These memorials, close to the heart of every settlement, stand as a reminder of what has taken place, and of its cost. The annual Service of Remembrance conducted here and at almost every other memorial reinforces the message: war is a terrible way to settle differences; it must be the very last resort. So let's honour those who gave their lives by doing our utmost to work for peace instead.

The third purpose was to remind us all, as the people of this land, that we belong together; that we stand together; that the sacrifices made here, from our community, bind us to those in every grieving community in our nation and to those who take decisions on our behalf. War is not some distant thing, fought by the Government through the Armed Forces whilst the rest of us remain somehow detached. The principles, the sacrifice, the courage and the cost are undertaken and shared by ordinary people - people who were known and loved even here in this place, and whose loved ones bear the pain.

My eccentric 19th-century predecessor, the Revd John Craig, erected what he called 'Ebenezer stones' around this town - stones intended to bear witness to the truth and hope of the Gospel. He died before the 20th century dawned, with all its tragic bloodshed. But this memorial is a more enduring witness to Gospel values. In bearing these names with pride, with honour, and with gratitude, it proclaims profound and poignant truth: of sacrifice and suffering for the common good; of courage; of the striving for justice and for peace. And it does so in order that we may heed its message, and remember the human cost of strife.