

Remembrance Service 2018

The war to end all wars.

The heroes.

Private Henry 'Napper' Tandey, VC, DCM, MM, from Kenilworth Street. Victoria Cross for conspicuous bravery. Military medal for heroism. Distinguished Conduct Medal for determined bravery. Mentioned in despatches five times. The most highly decorated private soldier of the British Army in the first world war.

Lieutenant John Barrett, VC, from Regent Street.

Lance Corporal William Amey, VC, MM, who settled in Leamington when the war ended, and whose grave is in our town.

Captain Arthur Kilby, VC, MC, whose parents lived on Lillington Avenue.

On this monument, the names of about 570 who fought in that war and who never returned. That's about one out of every 50 people living in Leamington at that time.

We pledge to remember them today, along with others whose names are written here or in our hearts: from the Second World War; Malaysia; Korea; Northern Ireland; the Falklands. We pledge to remember all those who have died in the service of our country, but in this anniversary year, the particular focus is on those who fought and died in World War 1.

They were not just native British forces 'whom we knew, and whose memory we treasure'; they were also men from around the British Empire, especially India; and men from the forces of our allies - and of their empires too. Many races, many faiths, from many continents.

The war poets tell us what the war was like. It was not glamorous or attractive. Far from it. Conditions in the trenches were damp, squalid, and fearful. Men gave their lives - for what? For the poet Wilfred Owen, there's an undercurrent of futility in his writings: why are we doing this? What is the point of all this suffering? He speaks of 'the pity of war, the pity war distilled' - and in one poem, he dreams of going down into hell, and meeting his enemy there. 'I am the enemy you killed, my friend', he says.

This was wisdom forged in the heat and the horror of battle, by a man seriously injured and shell-shocked in 1916, who returned voluntarily to the Western Front in 1918, where he was killed; a man who was posthumously awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. Yet a man who realised that war was not the real answer to the problems of the world.

That same humanity is glimpsed in another well-known story, true or apocryphal. Henry Tandey spared the life of a wounded German. 'I took aim but couldn't shoot a wounded man, so I let him go', he said. How sad that the sense of shared humanity and the experience of life-sparing grace was not reciprocated and lived out by the wounded man. If the story is true, that man was Adolf Hitler himself.

After the war, things changed. There was a greater recognition of the value of people across the social spectrum. It had been well proven that courage and ability were not confined to the officer class. There was a drive to build 'homes fit for heroes': council housing. The League of Nations was founded, aiming to maintain world peace.

But despite the bravery and sacrifice we commemorate today, despite the strivings for a better society and a better world, it was not to last; next year, as you know, we shall be commemorating the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War 2.

Part of our remembrance, today and every day, is to work for a society and a world which is more peaceful, more just; a kinder home for all of us who share it. I spent much of yesterday at our great Cathedral in Coventry, built from the ashes and rubble and deep anguish of war; built with a vision to work with former enemies 'to build a kinder, more Christ-child-like world.' It's a place of radical inclusion and reconciliation, as every church and every human heart should aspire to be.

That stands in increasingly sharp contrast to some of the public discourse and action in the world around us. There are worrying signs of people turning against those who are not like themselves, yet who are still our neighbours: increasing race hate; Islamophobia; anti-Semitism; the stirring of hatred against trans people, refugees, asylum-seekers.

Then there's the absolute scandal of Windrush; the 'hostile environment' for immigrants; the uncertain future for Europeans who have lived among us even for decades; the benefits system described as 'pointlessly cruel' to the sick and the disabled; fear in the traveller community that those without official papers are under threat. Many of you, I know, are utterly appalled at such things - and rightly so.

Friends, it's absolutely right to commemorate the huge sacrifices of 1914-1918 in this centenary year. It's absolutely right. Yet whilst we do so, let's not forget the Second World War. Let's remember what it was about. Let's pull back from the perilous journey of division and hatred before it's too late; before we become the people against whom we fought in that second devastating conflict.

And let's work together, whatever our faith or lack of faith, to bridge the fractures in our society; to use our words for good and not for ill; to build a kinder, more Christ-child-like world in whatever way we can. That's the path of life, and hope, and peace.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.'