

Remembrance Sunday 2017

Lest we forget.

Lest we forget, we gather here on the 100th anniversary of the end of the 3rd Battle of Ypres, almost to the day. It was one of the most gruelling and costly campaigns of the First World War. The offensive began on the 31st July 1917 and concluded on the 10th November; severe wet weather reduced the battlefield to mud, hampered military action, and increased the misery in the trenches. Reported casualty numbers vary, but approached 1/3 million on the Allied side, and another 1/4 million on the German side. There's a strong likelihood that many of the names inscribed on this memorial are of those who perished during that conflict. And the memorial is here, lest we forget.

Like many of you, I suspect, I have a family connection with that battle. My grandfather served in it. He never spoke of the horrors he experienced, but he certainly never forgot. Among his values, and those of his generation who had seen their friends and comrades die and who knew the cost, was that remembrance meant working for peace; working for a better world than the one which had collapsed into such turmoil and bloodshed. Otherwise such suffering was completely futile. Those values were mirrored on the international stage, with the setting-up in 1920 of the League of Nations, which tried, and failed, to avert future war through dialogue.

Lest we forget.

Again, after the Second World War, remembrance included the urge to build victory into peace. Internationally, the United Nations was founded. So was Christian Aid, to relieve the needs of German refugees. Within the nation, there was great social reform to unite the country in peacetime as it had been united in war. The NHS was established, part of the Welfare State which sought to ensure everyone was cared for from the cradle to the grave - because everyone matters. And at war memorials throughout the land, the annual Service of Remembrance included a pledge to work in the service of God and humanity, for peace, and for the eradication of human need and suffering. Lest we forget, these are the values borne out of the sacrifice of so many of our people through terrible times of war.

My grandfather died almost 50 years ago, taking his memories, his wisdom, and his service to others with him to the grave. I wonder whether he would feel today that we remain faithful to the true spirit of remembrance.

I wonder what he'd make of international leaders who walk away from diplomacy and shared agreements, and of the spirit of nationalism, which in the past has so often led to war, stirring in so many lands?

I wonder what he'd make of our national life, as social divisions intensify and the weakest are marginalised? Of the divisiveness of political ideology, whether of the hard right or the hard left, seemingly unfettered by compassion and common sense? Of the way in which we all seem to find it so hard to make compromises for the common good by sharing the middle ground?

I wonder whether he'd consider that we've forgotten something vital; forgotten that remembrance is futile unless it's part of a shared endeavour to develop peace, justice, and wholeness of life for all people?

Lest we forget, it's the insidious temptations of human life which lead to conflict. The temptation to put selfishness and greed in the place of generosity of spirit and of heart. The temptation to replace the power of love with the love of power. The temptation to scapegoat and resent those who differ from us.

And the cost is here, in plain sight, written in the names of real, local people here on this memorial. Written, lest we forget.

Thank God for the sacrifice they made for our freedom and peace. And in remembering, in thanksgiving, whatever your faith or lack of faith, strive afresh to work for reconciliation and peace, hope, and mutual love.