

Remembrance Day at St Peter's 2020
Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison

At the heart of this service lies our sombre remembrance of those who gave their lives for this country in the two world wars of the last century; and our thanksgiving for the peace and freedom which have prevailed on these shores since 1945. We especially commemorate those of this city and county who lost their lives, both service men and women and civilians; we also share in the grief of those families from this area who have lost loved ones in the course of conflicts since then, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq. We give thanks for the work of the Royal British Legion, and for all those who continue to give support to those who have suffered in war or as a result of war. We must not forget that it's often not easy to adapt to civilian life following a period in the armed forces, and Nottingham certainly has its share of these, many of whom will never forget the traumas of the battlefield.

But as we remember those who fought and died in wars past, we are also aware of all the recent conflicts around the world, many of which arose from long standing animosities and tensions, which are kept alive by the recollection of past grievances. This makes us ask: what role does memory serve? Is its primary purpose to preserve peace? Or does it glorify war? Can it keep alive the effects of past hurts, and provide fuel for further violence?

Of course the memory of past wars and those who suffered in them can do all these things. It is up to us in this generation to make these memories a force for good, rather than perpetuating a sense of them and us, with 'them' still being the enemy. Now every nation needs to provide for the defence of its people, and to be prepared for any acts of belligerence on the part of others. Our remembrance of those who suffered and died as a result of past wars, however, should remind us of the horrors and tragedies of war; that every life is precious; and that war should never be just one policy option among many but should always be a last resort. One lesson of the two world wars is that conflicts can all too easily spiral out of control, and that the cost of war in terms of lives lost, as well as the economic cost, can rapidly escalate

far beyond what anyone expected. We must never forget that in the First World War, in all the nations which were involved, there were between 15 and 19 million military and civilian deaths, and that some 23 million military personnel were wounded. In the UK there were between 700,000 and 800,000 military deaths; war-related civilian deaths brought the total to around 1,000,000, out of a population of around 45 million. In the Second World War, the total number of deaths worldwide was between 50 and 80 million (3 or 4 times greater than in World War 1). Around one third of these were of military personnel, the rest being war related deaths including the consequences of famine, imprisonment in war, and epidemics.

These numbers are so massive that it is hard to us today fully to comprehend their enormity. But each one of these was an individual; people with hopes and dreams, wanting to love and be loved, sometimes strong, sometimes weak; most of whom left behind mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, whose lives would never be the same again. We are reminded of this by our war memorials. Most of these are simply lists of names; but behind each name lies a person. Here in St Peter's, the names on our war memorials give us a glimpse of some of the people who lost their lives as a result of this conflict, such as:

- Alonzo Mantle: lived in the Broad Marsh; went to Bluecoat School; a member of the Boys' Brigade; joined a so-called bantam battalion of the Sherwood Foresters whose soldiers were mainly short in stature; died in 1916 aged 19, buried in Abbeville Cemetery in France.
- William Murden of the Scottish Rifles: wounded in France and sent to a hospital in Dublin, where he died in 1915 aged 25. Buried in Nottingham's General Cemetery (on the left as you go on the tram towards the Forest)
- Annie Freeman, who died in July 1918 when the national shell filling factory at Chilwell, where she was working, suffered a massive explosion, killing 134 workers and injuring 250 others. Annie is one of the very few women to be included in war memorials.
- Ernest Frederick Snow of the 4th Battalion Sherwood Foresters. Ernest Snow had twice returned home from France in the first World War having become ill; in 1918 his body was found in the Nottingham canal. He had been about to be

sent back to France but was so fearful that he is thought to have taken his own life.

Four glimpses, then, of individuals who lost their lives as a result of war; there have been no doubt millions of similar experiences both in this country and around the world. Wilfred Owen, soldier in the First World War and poet, was especially skilled at evoking the traumas of war whilst also drawing our thoughts to the bigger picture; the need for lessons to be learned, for the blood that was shed not to have been spilt in vain. In his poem 'Strange Meeting', which I read just now, he describes a man who has just died in war meeting a soldier whom he had killed. This enemy soldier describes the hopes he had had, now suddenly extinguished; the happiness and sadness he had experienced in his life; his courage, his wisdom; and also his hope that the world's war machine might one day be washed clean of blood. There is a kind of reconciliation between the two soldiers, in death; the poignancy is that it took death to bring them together.

On this Remembrance Day, then, perhaps we can be most true to the memory of those who gave their lives for this country in the two world wars, and that of all those who suffered and died in those conflicts, if we resolve afresh to play our own part in creating a more peaceful world, one where people do not have to die to make peace possible. Building bridges between peoples of different races and religions; being peaceable towards those around us; supporting the casualties of war; reminding governments that military action should always be a last resort. And, of course, if we can somehow manage to love our enemies as well as our friends, we will be following in the footsteps of Christ. Amen.