



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Remembrance Sunday

Readings: [Jonah 3.1-5, 10](#), [Mark 1 14-20](#)

10 November 2024

Traditionally services on Remembrance Sunday start earlier and with shorter sermons, so clergy and congregation who wish, can attend the civic service in the Market Place. So last year when I preached on this occasion, I offered you “what 3 words” to sum up Remembrance Sunday: the “what 3 words” of *sacrifice, memorial, silence*. This year I seek to go one better and simply offer you “what 2 poems”: one a poem of despair, and the other a poem of hope.

The first, a poem by Wilfred Owen, written in the trenches of World War I before he was killed there in the final days before the Armistice: *“The Parable of the Old Man and the Young”*. It draws on the Genesis story of Abraham’s attempt to sacrifice his son Issac as an offering to God, only to be restrained at the last moment by an angel, and told to sacrifice instead the ram caught in a nearby thicket. But Owen, identifying the sacrificial ram as “the Ram of Pride” deviates from the biblical account, and in his poem’s haunting concluding lines condemns all those in power who took their countries to war in 1914, the rulers of Europe who believed that sacrificing their nations’ “Ram of Pride” was too high a price to pay. Yet the irony is that the real cost of this preserving of Pride was millions of dead: the seed of Europe.

*“Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him...
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.”*

Writing over a century ago, Owen despaired of the old men whose pride prioritised war over peace. But today, as we remember those who paid with their lives the price of that pride, we must also remember that the Ram of Pride is still being preserved by “old men”, be they Ayatollahs, or Prime Ministers, or Presidents, all those who have gone to war in The Middle East or in Ukraine, motivated by their ancient tribal rivalries or historic territorial longings, those who have refused diplomacy and cease-fire in favour of the sacrifice of the lives of hostages and innocent civilians.

So on this day we remember the human cost of war, and its ultimate futility.

Lest we forget.

Roland Leighton, a Lieutenant in World War I, in a letter to his fiancée Vera Brittain, challenged those who took pride in war as being somehow glorious:

“The dug-outs have nearly all been blown in, the wire entanglements are a wreck, and in amongst the chaos of splintered iron, blackened timber and shapeless earth are the fleshless, blackened bones of simple men. Let him who thinks war is a glorious, golden thing, who loves to roll forth stirring words of exhortation, invoking honour and praise and valour and love of country, let him but look at a little pile of sodden grey rags that cover half a skull and a shin bone. Who is there who has known and seen, who can say that Victory is worth the death of even one of these”¹

Roland Leighton died of his wounds in 1915. He was aged 20. Part of the human cost of war.

Lest we forget.

And from another conflict, General Eisenhower, himself no pacifist, reminds us that:

*“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies, in the final sense, a theft, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, from those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its labourers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.”*²

Lest we forget.

So now a second poem, this time not of despair but of hope: *“In Flanders Fields”* by John McCrae. For out of the blackened shapeless earth of conflict can spring up new life: new life signified by the poppies we wear as symbols of remembrance this day.

During World War I, McCrae, a Canadian doctor, served as a front-line medical officer. In the spring of 1915, he composed this poem at Ypres, in the back of a field ambulance, the day after he had seen one of his closest friends killed in the fighting and buried in a makeshift grave with a simple wooden cross. Wild poppies were already beginning to bloom between the crosses marking the many graves around. Unable to help his friend or any of the others who had died, McCrae gave them a voice, a voice of hope in the future, the hope for which they had fought and died.

The poem memorably begins:

*In Flanders fields, the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row....*

But it is the final verse which carries the Dead’s most powerful message to us today:

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

The torch they handed on to us today is not only the torch of remembrance, but also the torch of responsibility. We are called, as were the first disciples by Jesus, and our calling is to carry the responsibility to work to ensure that in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”³.

Lest we forget.

**The Revd Dr Alan Flintham
Cathedral Chaplain**

1. Roland Leighton to Vera Brittain, 11 September 1915, in *Letters from a Lost Generation* (1998), p165.
2. Dwight D Eisenhower *Chance for Peace*, 16 April 1953 <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/eisenhowers/quotes>
3. Isaiah 2: 4