

Remembrance Sunday 2017
Sermon preached by Rev Tony Windross on 12 November 2017

By an extraordinary coincidence –

Remembrance Sunday *last* year –

was the centenary of the end of the *Battle of the Somme*.

By the end of the first day – 20,000 British soldiers were dead –

and by the end of the 141 days that it lasted, a million soldiers were dead.

Whilst Remembrance Sunday *this* year –

is the centenary of the end of the *Battle of Passchendale*.

Casualty figures are disputed –

but are in the region of half a million dead.

Numbers too large to comprehend –

with these two battles alone resulting in –

the deaths of a million-and-a half human beings –

and the desperate damaging of well over two million more.

All for no obvious purpose – political, strategic, moral – or otherwise.

Given the way most families had suffered some sort of grievous loss –

during what came to be known (without a trace of irony) as the Great War –

it was hardly surprising (given the unprecedented slaughter involved) –

that once it had all come to an end –

it was felt appropriate to acknowledge the carnage of those terrible 4 years.

And within a few years of the Armistice –

annual services of Remembrance were being held across the country –

which have continued ever since.

Right from the start – there were poppies.

Always poppies.

Always blood red.

And if you're a public figure of any kind

(especially a politician or a newsreader or a football pundit)

wearing a red poppy from mid October onwards –

is absolutely obligatory.

Not to do so would cause *enormous* upset –

so no one in positions like that ever does.

But *why* is it thought to be so important?

What does wearing the poppy – *actually mean*?

As with any symbol – there are all sorts of associations.

With the poppy symbolising patriotism – which means –

a love of one's country – and a pride in being British.

It expresses an appreciation of the fact –

that our way of life is only possible because the Kaiser and Hitler *didn't* triumph –

and a recognition of the price in human life that was paid to achieve this.

It symbolises the personal tragedy and pain –

that some have carried for 75 years since their loved ones were killed.

It recognises the loss of life that conflicts involving this country –

since the Second World War have resulted in.

(and the way that members of the armed forces continue to put themselves

(quite literally) – in the firing line for the sake of the rest of us).

All these are important and positive associations –

but there's another side to the story that *also* needs to be recognised.

Which is that some see the poppy as helping to glorify war –

(or maybe helping to sanitise it – so that War-Themed events in the present –

can be seen as a bit of light entertainment – rather than gross bad taste)

There was no danger of trivialising war in the 1930s, of course –

as too many memories were still raw and bleeding.

But some people were *so* fearful of the danger of glorifying it –

that it was then that the practice began of wearing *white* poppies instead.

As a non-jingoistic '*symbol of grief for all people of all nationalities,*

armed forces and civilians alike, who are victims of war'.

But despite such laudable aims –

those who wore white poppies have been (and still are)

accused of disrespect to the war dead.

They've been shouted at and abused.
Some were sacked from their jobs.
And white poppy wreaths have been removed from war memorials and trampled on.
Many associated the white poppy with conscientious objection – and the 'conchies'
–
who'd been thought of as 'cowards and shirkers' in the Great War.
There's no doubt that it took (and takes) a lot of courage and determination –
to go out with a white poppy pinned to one's jacket.
And that's because it's always difficult to swim against the tide.
Much easier simply to put a red one on –
like everyone else.
Much easier (as in all other spheres) – to keep your head down –
and your mouth shut.
But the sheer *existence* of white poppies –
force us to ask some difficult questions about the red one.
Is it more a symbol of loss –
than an aspiration for peace?
Does it help us to look forward –
or is it mainly about looking back?
Is it in memory of those in the forces –
or does it include non-combatant civilians?
Does it include the dead of other nations?
If so – is it just those who were our allies in the two Great Wars?
Or is it the dead of all nations?
There's no way that asking questions like these –
could reasonably be construed as dishonouring anyone.
But the subject is so sensitive that it's not surprising –
the whole 'red-or-white-poppy-issue' has the potential to cause enormous upset.
But to allow *this* to get in the way of thinking about it –
would be the worst possible way of honouring the memory –
of the 200 million human beings who died as a result of war during the 20th century –
by far the bloodiest century in human history.

All of us would agree that war is a terrible thing –
as reasonable people are *always* appalled at the prospect –
of killing other human beings.

The problem comes when trying to translate noble words like this – into deeds.

Because that's when it becomes obvious –
that in many cases people are simply paying lip-service to an idea –
rather than expressing a serious intention of doing something about it –
in terms of trying to make the world a different kind of place.

As is always the case with complicated matters –
things end up being grossly oversimplified and polarised.

You're either for the protection of our way of life –
or you're opposed to it.

You're either on the side of the angels –
or you're not.

You're either a patriot –
or a traitor.

In such an atmosphere, thoughtful debate is rarely possible –
which is why it doesn't tend to happen.

But if this day of all days doesn't get us thinking –
about whether we need to do more than simply carry on as we've always done –
there's little hope for the future.

Unless the suffering and death we've come together to remember –
jerk us into a realisation
that war is as much an instrument of foreign policy as it ever was –
there's no reason to suppose things will ever improve.

There *may* be circumstances –
where war is the only appropriate response.

But such situations are likely to be far fewer in number –
than political (and military) leaders would have us believe

There *may* be circumstances –
where war is a truly moral choice –

in order to combat some appalling evil.

But such situations need to be distinguished from those where war is simply – a way of maintaining control of resources thought to be in our national interest – or when our national pride (or the pride of politicians) needs asserting.

A way of maintaining the status quo – which happens to be working rather favourably for us.

The challenge is to pay due homage to – the loss and the horror and the suffering and the sacrifice – of so many people (particularly during the 20th century but also before and after it as well) – whilst making every possible effort to try to ensure – that the killing doesn't simply go on and on and on.

We live in a very violent world – which is also a very unequal world.

With all sorts of links between the two.

And so although today is a time for looking back and giving thanks – *it needs to be a lot more than that.*

It needs to be a time – of *looking forward.*

A time when we commit to work for peace and justice.

A time when we value the contribution made by people we will never know – to keep the flames of democracy and freedom alight.

A time when we build on their foundations, reach out to the future – and try to bring about a world where conflicts are dealt with in other ways.

Of course it's idealistic (maybe even unrealistic) to speak in such terms – but the alternatives don't have anything whatsoever to commend them.

Of course there will be people so full of anger and hatred – that they are irredeemably wedded to the use of force – and unable to countenance any other possibilities.

But whatever their protestations – they mustn't be allowed to dominate the discussion.

This is why the sheer existence of white poppies is so important.

Because whether we choose to wear one or not –

they act as an ongoing reminder of the need to try and think outside the box.
A refusal to be bamboozled by the view –
that the future has to be simply more of the past.
A refusal to accept that this is how things have to be.
There's no reason to suppose they've got to be like that –
which is why in our prayers today there *has* to be an emphasis –
on the need to look forward.
On 11th November 1906 (exactly 111 years ago this weekend) –
the *Lake District Fell and Rock Climbing Club* held its first meeting.
The aims of the club were to encourage rock climbing and fell walking in the LD –
and to act as a bond of union for its members.
Within a few years –
20 of those members had died in the Great War.
And to honour their memory –
the Club raised the money to buy 3000 acres of the fells around Great Gable
(one of the most spectacular of all the Lake District summits,
towering 3000 feet above Wastwater).
In October 1923 the title-deeds were handed over to the National Trust –
securing forever the freedom to roam at will –
over one of the wildest and most beautiful parts of the country.
I've not looked at a weather forecast today –
but the chances are that if it's not actually raining at this moment on Great Gable –
it's going to do so very soon, because that's what it's like most of the time.
As anyone who's been there will know –
it's a long and steep trek up to the summit.
But it's one that will have been made earlier this morning
(as on every Remembrance Sunday, whatever the weather) –
by several hundred people –
whose wreaths, crosses and poppies will by now be tied to boulders –
or wedged into cracks in the rock to try and stop them blowing away.
The fact that so many people bother to clamber all the way to the top of Great Gable
–

shows just how powerful is the urge to remember those –
who have died in the struggle for what they hoped would be a better world.
And so today is *not* primarily a nostalgia-fest –
but a time when we think about lost hopes, unrealised dreams – and broken hearts.
A time when we lament the sheer wastefulness of war –
and rage about our apparent inability to find other ways of arranging human affairs.
A time when we express our gratitude at the way things have turned out –
giving thanks for the sacrifices others made –
that have enabled *us* to enjoy the benefits of freedom and democracy.
But unless we manage to change the way we organise international affairs –
so as to bring good out of bad, life out of death, light out of darkness –
we're saying that the suffering and death of past conflicts –
didn't actually make the world a better place.
That they didn't, in fact, actually amount to anything much at all –
and new generations have got to do it all over again.
And again. And to *keep on doing so* –
in an endless, blood-soaked sequence – forever.
That's just too appalling to contemplate –
so we need to raise our heads further, and aim a great deal higher.
We need to honour their memory better –
by trying to build a world where there's a great deal more *justice*.
Because that will also be a world –
where there's a great deal more peace.
The philosopher George Santayana said that
'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'.
And the best way we can honour the memory of the dead of the wars of the past –
is to *try to live in the present* (and the future) *without more killing*.
Peace is not the absence of war –
but the presence of justice.
And whilst it would be absurd to anticipate the imminent disappearance of conflict –
a world where people *are at peace with themselves* –

is the way to a world where people *are at peace with one another*.
Unless human hearts (starting with ours) are changed –
the world will go on exactly the same –
with all the suffering and slaughter we're so sickened by.
We need to do everything in our power –
to take the awfulness and the horror of yesterday that we remember today
(and which we so fearfully anticipate tomorrow) –
and transform it into something positive and life-giving.
The best reason (and maybe the *only* reason?)
for continuing to observe Remembrance Sunday –
is not as a fund-raising exercise for the British Legion –
but to keep trying to pull the world back from the abyss of despair and hatred.
Those 20 Lake District climbers of a century ago –
have 3000 acres of glorious open fell as their memorial.
What *living* memorial can *we* work to provide –
in honour of those on *our* hearts today?