

## Poppies

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In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.  
We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.

That poem, written by the Canadian poet John McCrae, speaks on behalf of the soldiers buried in the war cemeteries, and reminds us that the wearing of poppies on Remembrance Day goes back to the fields of poppies that started to grow in the former battlefields during and after the end of the first World War. Poppy seeds that had laid dormant in the mud burst into life when the ground was disturbed to excavate graves for the dead, and as a result the landscape looked as though it were covered in blood. The poppy became not just a reminder of the sacrifice of those who had died, but a symbol of new life – of a new beginning. It represented hope – a reminder that it was possible to live *without* killing one another.

The number of people who can remember the Second World War, let alone the first, is rapidly diminishing. And you may wonder why those who had no part in it should be expected to remember. Some today believe that it is better to forget. But that, I believe, is because they mistakenly associate the red poppy with violence and enmity, not with sacrifice and resurrection.

Why remember the conflicts of the past? Isn't it better to forget them? To avoid anything that looks like war-mongering? To look instead to a better future? Or do we perhaps *need* to remember? After all, as many have pointed out, nations who forget the past are in danger of repeating the same mistakes in the future. We only have to look round the world today to realize the truth of that comment.

November is a month of remembrance of things which we are fast forgetting. We kick off with All Saints and All Souls, which were once celebrated as thanksgiving and the remembrance of Christians of past ages, but which have now been swallowed up into Hallowe'en. What was once a Christian festival has been replaced by a pagan one, associated with carved pumpkins and trick and treating; stay indoors on this night, or you may meet up with a ghost or spooky creature of some kind. Remembrance of the saints of the past has been replaced by an excuse to enjoy ourselves.

And then we had November 5<sup>th</sup>, remembered this time in a bit of doggerel which became a nursery rhyme:

Remember, remember, the 5<sup>th</sup> of November,  
Gunpowder, treason and plot.  
I see no reason why gunpowder treason  
Should ever be forgot.

I can, I think, say with confidence that I am the only person present tonight who has memories that stretch back before what we now call the Second World War. Not, of course, as far as 1605, the date of the original Gunpowder plot, so that my memories do *not* include the treachery of Guy Fawkes and the friction between Catholic and Protestant in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; nor, indeed, was I really conscious, when we let off a few rockets and sparklers in our back garden in the 1930's, of the reason why we were doing so. The recollection of past problems had already faded, and given way to celebration – a celebration which, had we paused to analyse it, would have been of the establishment of democracy in this country.

And today, following quickly after November 5<sup>th</sup>, we have Remembrance Sunday, a foretaste of Remembrance Day itself this coming Tuesday, November 11<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of the signing of the Armistice at the end of the First World War. Like All Saints and November 5<sup>th</sup>, this too is changing. Many ignore it, not wishing to be reminded of past conflicts. In France, I'm told, the day is a public holiday – presumably originally so that one could spend time remembering, but nowadays more likely just another day to enjoy life.

So what *should* we be doing on these days of remembrance? The word 'remember' is made up of two parts: 're' and 'member'. A 'member' is a part of what should form an entity, so to 'remember' must mean to restore the pieces – as do its synonyms, to 're-collect' and to 're-call'. It implies restoration, a putting-of-things to rights. Our focus, then, should be on reconciliation, not war-mongering.

Remembrance Day, then, far from being a glorification of war, represents a deliberate rejection of war, and a call for reconciliation.

Our two biblical readings this evening represented two very different approaches to life. First we had the story of Cain and Abel, where Cain's jealousy of Abel led to murder. Cain blamed it all on God, of course, because God had accepted Abel's sacrifice and rejected Cain's, but the real problem was that Cain lived by the principle of 'Me First'. He wanted prosperity, and resented the fact that Abel possessed what he lacked. Cain's attitude leads to jealousy, murder, and war.

And then, in the New Testament, we heard how Jesus, asked to declare the first of God's laws, insisted on listing two. Love of God cannot be separated from love of others, however much one may try. And you must love your neighbour *as yourself*. There is no room for 'Me First' or for 'Me, not You'. To love God is to love justice: it is to recognize the rights of the other person. The way advocated by Jesus is the total opposite of that followed by Cain. It was the way followed by Jesus himself, and it led him to the cross. It is no wonder, then, that the cross became the symbol marking the graves of those in the Christian tradition who sacrificed their lives in war.

War memorials are often headed 'To the glory of God' – words that may well shock us, especially when we see them on the memorials of our former enemies. But once again we cannot blame God, for it was not the war that was to God's glory. God is glorified, not by the enmity, but by the self-sacrifice of those who suffered and died, and by those who endeavoured to build a just society and peace in place of war. The memorials remind us of past failures; but they encourage us to a better future. Like poppies, the cross reminds us of love and self-sacrifice, but also of hope and resurrection.

If any of you still watch the BBC, you may have seen part of last night's Festival of Remembrance from the Royal Albert Hall. A large number of military personnel are involved in the programme, often doing very military things, to the extent that it sometimes *appears* to be a celebration of military power. But last night the emphasis was on the veterans who survived and on the thousands who died in past conflicts, defending peace. At the end, a shower of poppy petals descended from the ceiling, recalling those who died in the two World Wars. They were an appropriate reminder of their sacrifice, and of *our* need to be grateful to them and to be prepared for the future.