

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 8th November 2020

November is the month of memories.

It began on the 1st with All Saints Day, then on the 2nd, All Souls Day.

Then comes the 5th –

“Please to remember the fifth of November,

Gunpowder, treason and plot;

We know of no reason why gunpowder treason

Should ever be forgot.”

And Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators who were caught in 1605 about to blow up the Houses of Parliament with 36 barrels of gunpowder, when the King and many senior statesmen would be present, is remembered with bonfires and firework displays most years, though this year will be quite different.

Then, Sunday, 8th November, people throughout the United Kingdom will meet in reduced numbers in churches the length and breadth of the land, and they will wear their poppies and they will lay poppy wreaths and remember the savagery and the slaughter of war and those who have died for the very precious freedom that we enjoy today. It is the Sunday nearest to the 11th November, the date when the guns which had been firing almost nonstop across most of Europe for four years between 1914 and 1918 fell silent. The First World War was supposed to be the war to end all wars.

Last year I was visiting close friends in Romsey in Hampshire on Remembrance Weekend to celebrate their Golden Wedding, and on Remembrance Sunday, Ian, Margaret and I went along to the civic service in the stately Romsey Abbey, where Lord Mountbatten is buried, and then we walked with the townsfolk in their hundreds to the Memorial Park for the laying of the wreaths at the War Memorial. Both services were very moving indeed. Sadly, we cannot have services this year at our local Memorials because of the Pandemic.

Since the Second World War, our country has been involved in many conflicts – Korea, Northern Ireland, the Falklands, two wars in the Gulf, the invasion of Iraq, bloodier and longer than anyone had been prepared for, and the very recent campaign in Afghanistan.

For several years when I was Minister in Ayr, I conducted a Remembrance Service for a small group of former soldiers down at the Cenotaph at Wellington Square. All the men had served in the Ayrshire Yeomanry, and they looked back at friends they knew who had paid the supreme sacrifice.

To those who say that this Sunday is a glorification of war, I would argue most strongly that it is far from it – it is a poignant and sobering day of solemn remembrance, calling to mind the hellish

carnage that war brings. God forbid that our young folk should ever experience the nightmares which our fathers and grandfathers endured.

When I look at the list of names on the war memorial at Prestwick Cross and on the Memorial Windows in the Church, it is a sobering thought just to pause and think how awful war really is.

Each one of those names was a son, a daughter, a father, a mother, a brother, a sister – ordinary people like us who knew Prestwick and went to school here and walked its streets and lived in the burgh. They went off to fight in the Army, the Navy, the Air Force and did not return.

You only have to go up to Ayr Cemetery and see the graves of young men from different parts of the Commonwealth, many of them aged 17, 18, 19, who are buried there.

It is eternally important that we remind ourselves of the dreadful cost of war if we are ever to live in peace.

The most compelling outward sign of our remembrance is the simple red flower, the Flanders Poppy. Across the world it has come to represent the sacrifice made by all who have given their lives in conflict.

And it was the poppy that was chosen after the First World War as a symbol of those who had died in battle.

It began with the death of a friend of a man called John McCrae in Belgium in 1915.

John McCrae was kneeling at the grave of his friend and he was moved to write a poem reflecting the scene around him :

“In Flanders field 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 among 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 Field.”

John McCrae was not happy with his finished poem and he threw it away, but one of his fellow officers found it and was so touched that he sent it to England and it was published in a magazine called Punch.

So, to this day, the poppy is purchased and proudly worn and all the monies raised from their sale helps ex servicemen and women and their families in very practical ways.

But the poppy also helps us to concentrate our thoughts on the past and to pray in the present for peace.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God."

And Mahatma Gandhi, the great Indian leader who was himself the victim of the assassin's bullet, said, "Peace is not something that you wish for; it is something that you make, something that you do, something that you are."

So our remembering, if it is to be done in the spirit of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, is to result in committing ourselves to building a better society, to breaking down barriers of prejudice and envy and hatred and all the things that make for war.

I hope you have bought a poppy and wear it proudly; I hope you will take time to remember those who have given of themselves so that we can live in a peaceful country today; and I hope that you and I will do all that we can to give peace a chance in a world which is still bloodied and bruised in many places.

The Reverend Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister