

**Psalm 130 Romans 8: 31-39 Matthew 4: 18-22**  
**A Sermon for Remembrance Sunday 14/11/21 – Rev Phil Wootton**

‘We always thank God for all of you,’ wrote St Paul in 1 Thessalonians 1: 2) ‘mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before God our Father your work produced by faith, labour prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Why does remembrance matter? Why does it matter today that we remember the work, labour, endurance and sacrifices of those who have served and suffered in war?

To ‘remember’ in this sense is not like a memory test or school home-work to learn the dates of a dozen medieval kings or 20 French verbs. It will not really make a difference if we can recall the number of casualties for each country in each World War, or the names of the generals in the Crimea. True remembering is putting things back into shape. It is trying to make sense of things. This may or may not involve facts and figures. It is using the stories we hear to make emotional connection; and using the emotions to put yourself in the story, perhaps asking, what would I have done? Remembering connects us individually and collectively: telling us who we are, where we come from, linking us to community, friends and family, and challenging us how we will act today. In Paul’s letter, he is not telling us he remembers where Thessaloniki is, or the names of its inhabitants. He is expressing human connection and concern, and honouring them for all they are doing.

Today we remember war through poppies. Indeed, the red poppy must be one of the most successful of brand recognitions ever. John McCrae’s poem says, *In Flanders fields where poppies grow / 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.* The poppy’s delicate beauty contrasts with the barbarity of bloodshed, a poignant symbol of the cost of war. This year is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first poppy appeal. It was in 1921 that selling poppies to support war veterans was first undertaken, with great success. In 2014, artists made 888,246 ceramic poppies as a Sea of Red at the Tower of London. Those who paused to view found themselves sharing tales of war – tales perhaps read in books or seen on TV, or perhaps passed down by word of mouth through the family. That is Remembrance.



We remember, without being able to see for ourselves. For those of us who have never been in the armed forces or experienced war, it often feels hard to speak with any authenticity, and yet it is we who most need to remember. Our different readings this morning all give hints, and clues and connections that can prompt and shape our memories.



We remember, through learning our history, the volunteers in 1914 signing up for Kitchener’s Army, and those at others times who flocked to answer their country’s call. It is so reminiscent of today’s Gospel reading – almost a repeat of last week’s – of Jesus’ call to his disciples. He called fishermen to leave the life and work they knew and understood, to enter a new life they had never imagined. We imagine, for fishermen-disciples as for soldiers, they were motivated by naïve enthusiasm and a sense of adventure, but we shouldn’t forget for some of Kitchener’s Army there was serious Christian duty, as for disciples there was real excitement for the rabbi from Nazareth. Both groups, in their different ways, would have to learn the sacrifices their call-up would entail.



We remember the disillusion, the mistakes, the misery, the strategic blunders that war seems inevitably to entail. Bruegel's painting, *The Blind Leading the Blind*, is highly suggestive of those volunteers not knowing what they were going to be in for. Sister Wendy's comments highlight the blindness of leaders who led their nations into war out of a mix of fear what the others would do and over-confidence in their own army's abilities. More profoundly, she points out that it's only by knowing

you're blind that you can begin the journey to healing. Otherwise, you end up in the ditch.

We remember how nations tend to enlist God to their own side, mis-applying the Bible in support. St Paul asked (rhetorically): 'If God is for us, who can be against?' – but he wasn't talking of two countries at war. As General the Lord Dannatt, former chief of General Staff wrote, 'God does not take sides between countries; however he is passionately concerned for the people who live in those countries and get caught up in war.' When that message is forgotten, too often the ordinary soldiers, and the civilians over whose lands they fight, are treated 'as sheep to be slaughtered.' Remember, so it's not repeated.

We remember those in the ditch: the defeated, the conquered and dislocated; the losers; the crushed in spirit. With them Psalm 130 calls: 'Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.' In the depths, waiting is all you can do. It resonates with some of the war time memoirs – stuck in the fox-hole, or the clapped-out tank, or cut off behind enemy lines – waiting in all probability for the bullet. In the depths, the Psalmist still cries out to God, and knows the way to redemption, in this life or the next, must be through forgiveness, not deserved, but purely by the mercy of God. In the depths all you can ask is that God remembers you.

We remember too the families waiting desperately yet fearfully for news. 'Remember me when I am gone.' 'Remember me with smiles not tears, / for all the joy through all the years / Recall the sweet fragrance that was ours, / A love as "sweet" as fragrant flowers.' Know the waiting at heaven's door, so all will be united, for evermore.

We remember God's mercy. We are tempted to think we are abandoned by God because circumstances go against us. But as St Paul wrote, 'Nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' That includes a whole lot of circumstances that sound very much tied in with warfare: 'trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or sword' – none of them can separate us from the love of God. Many, many people have discovered the truth of this affirmation, in all sorts of circumstances and situations, nothing can or does separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We remember because God remembers. Through the Scriptures we hear that message repeatedly. God remembered Noah, when he was adrift in the floods and storms. God remembered his covenant with Abraham, when Abraham's descendants were enslaved and oppressed. God remembered his covenant with David when David's descendants were defeated and exiled. And on the cross, the Son of God answered the thief's prayer, 'Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom,' with the words, 'Today you will be with me in paradise.'

Lord Jesus, remember us, as we remember those who have suffered through war, and help us always to work for peace.

Amen.