

## **Remembrance Day Matthew 4:18-22 – Sermon by Richard Shreeve**

What does Remembrance Day mean to you? For some who lost loved ones in the wars of the 20th century it will have very special memories, but for most of us it's a very necessary reminder of suffering and sacrifice by ordinary men and women in the interests of their nation and its cherished values. We commemorate this unique event every year. Perhaps we should pause to ask the question "Why?"

The trouble is we forget so soon. That's why even small communities have a memorial column; that's why we in Britain wear our Poppies, as a reminder, so that each generation of men and women should not forget what was done on their behalf. These memorials are there to help us to remember; they are there as visual aids to remind us of how, in the mercy of God, we've been delivered from tyranny ... "lest we forget".

It will be over 103 years since the official end of the hostilities in the first world war.

The death of nearly 1million British and many millions from other countries is still, rightly, remembered.

In the Gospel we just heard of Simon and Andrew, James and John immediately leaving their nets giving up everything and following Jesus to an uncertain and risky life.

In a similar way, so did many who answered the call of Kitchener.

Britain was the only major power not to begin the First World War with a conscripted army. After war broke out, it was obvious that the small professional British Army was not big enough for a global conflict.

In a wave of patriotic fervour, thousands of men answered Lord Kitchener's call to join up.

He realised that local ties could be used for national gain. Many more would volunteer if they could serve alongside their friends, relatives and workmates.

And so on 21 August 1914, the first Pals battalion was raised from the stockbrokers of the City of London. Immediately 1,600 men had joined what became the 10th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers.

Pals battalions became synonymous with the towns of northern Britain. Men from cities like Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle, Hull, Glasgow and Edinburgh all enlisted in their thousands in 1914 and 1915. And Pals battalions were also raised from Birmingham to Bristol and from Cambridge to Cardiff.

Many of these battalions suffered huge casualties and this ultimately ripped the heart out of many communities across our land.

Conscription then came in later when the volunteers were insufficient.

The idealism and the impulsive volunteering of so many men might seem strange to our generation.

We are much more careful and much less tolerant of death.

It is sobering to reflect on one statistic.

457 British men and women lost their lives since 2001 in Afghanistan. This was 457 too many.

But 457 would have been a very good day in the first world war. On July 1, 1916, during the Battle of the Somme, the British Army suffered 57,470 casualties.

Now, we might argue that many of the casualties would never have happened if tactics were different – but that was not the fault of the casualties.

Many of them signed up immediately – convinced that they had to do their duty. Despite the appalling casualties, despite the risks to life and limb.

We live in very different times now. I joined the Royal Air Force in 1962 not because my father was a "Tail-end Charlie" in a Lancaster bomber for the duration of the war. But in search of adventure. I served for 25 years and enjoyed every moment of it. Fortunately I did not have to go to war.

How many of us would be delighted if our children decided to join up today?

We are, understandably much more risk averse today.

But both the Gospel reading and the bravery of so many young men in WW1, and since, remind us that sometimes we do need to answer a call. We need to do things immediately – we need to do what we know to be right.

Today we remember the sacrifice of so many.

In the military of course; and also the civilians – we must never forget the civilians.

Some calculations say that during the first world war 11% of the population of France became

casualties. And we know some 75 million people died in World War II, including about 20 million military personnel and 40 million civilians, many of whom died because of deliberate genocide, massacres, mass-bombings, disease, and starvation. In the 1940s Warfare began to affect not just those fighting – it began to affect everybody.

So we also remember all those non-combatants who lost their lives in France and Belgium, in the blitz, all the way through to the innocents who lose their lives in the present day due to war and terrorism.

John MacCrae, a Canadian surgeon serving in the British Army, wrote this famous poem: memorializing the April 1915 battle in Belgium's Ypres, after the death of a close friend.

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.

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.

What is interesting is that MacCrae – despite the horror he has experienced of war – still sees the need for it. He sees the urgent need for others to take the torch and carry it as best they can.

We may need sometimes to take up our quarrel with the foe. War may be a necessary evil, but it is necessary nonetheless. Necessary that evil may not thrive.

So today we remember.

We wear our poppies with pride.

But tomorrow what will we do with them?

Our Poppies - do we throw them in the bin? Do they end up discarded in a sideboard? Do we forget all about them?

True remembrance means none of these things. True remembrance means holding onto our poppies and letting them remind us every day of our duty. Our immediate duty, yours and mine, to do all in our power to maintain peace and solidarity between all peoples.

That I would say would be the best way of honouring the fallen and not breaking faith with them.

And that is the best way we can take their torch and hold it high.

We, in the Christian Church, also have a symbol. It's the Cross of Jesus. One of His great sayings is: 'Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends' (**John 15:13**). And that's what He did for us.

Two great symbols of sacrifice – the Poppy and the Cross.

I would like to finish with a true story from WW2

General Sir William Dobbie who was Governor General of Malta during the Second World War – at a time when the defence of Malta was at its darkest hour.

The Italian forces had overwhelming superiority, both in numbers and firepower. Yet Malta never fell to the enemy – and for their courageous stand - the whole island was awarded the George Cross. Dobbie, a committed Christian, realised the weakness of his position and that God alone was "his present help in trouble". His first "Special Order of the Day", defining policy governing the defence of the island read: "The decision of His Majesty's Government to fight until our enemies are defeated will have been heard with the greatest satisfaction by all ranks of the garrison of Malta. It may be that hard times lie ahead of us, but however hard they may be, I know that the courage and determination of all ranks will not falter and that with God's help we will maintain the security of this fortress, I therefore call upon all officers and other ranks humbly to seek God's help and then in reliance upon Him to do their duty unflinchingly. Those were the words of a Christian General engaged in the height of the Second World War. His Christian faith was a reality when under fire. He looked to God for strength in the tasks that he had to do.