

Reflection on Armistice Day, 11th November 2018

As we made our way to church this morning, we will have been thinking of different people, remembering different times and places – and many will have been memories tinged with sadness on this weekend when we remember 100 years since peace came in 1918. In the ten years following the first world war, that combat which eclipsed all previous conflicts in terms of loss of life, it became the firm conviction of many that it had been the war that was to end all wars.

The last British soldier to die during WWI was Private George Edwin Ellison at 9:30 a.m. ninety minutes before the armistice was signed. He was also one of the 11,000 people killed on the war's last day.

19 was the official age for a British soldier to be sent overseas but many lied about their age. Probably $\frac{1}{4}$ of a million children, the youngest reputedly twelve, fought in the British army during WW1. A soldier's average life expectancy while in the trenches was six weeks.

War is brutal, messy and chaotic and it is really difficult to be specific about the numbers involved who were wounded or died. Around ten million military personnel died. A further 6 million went missing during the war and were presumed dead. Two out of three soldiers died in battle, the rest died due to infections or disease. At the end of the war and in the months afterwards, the Spanish flu killed many more.

The total number of civilian deaths is even harder to determine. Some would estimate ten million, others twenty. Because of the war, many suffered from disease and malnutrition. Far greater in number even than these, were those who were injured either physically or emotionally, those who lost sweethearts, members of their family, best friends

But many of us don't remember statistics, usually we need to remember people from our family and friends – and we remember them because it would be sacrilegious to forget. Their memory is profound, they are loved by us and they are loved by their creator: to forget them would be to make profane something that is holy. In this time of worship of our creator, we remember those who were loved into existence by God who are precious in his sight. We remember them whether they are civilian or military, an army general or a stretcher-bearer, a housewife or a farmer, whether they were known by one family alone or their name is known by many. And we remember that like us they wanted to live and not die; they wanted to be well and not injured; living lives full of happy days not living with bereavement, or pain or fear.

We are remembering those whose conscience led them to fight and those whose beliefs led them to be conscientious objectors. One story amongst many ...

When Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, Clement Attlee was on holiday with his brother Tom. Both men knew what they must do: Clement hurried back to London to enlist in the army, while Tom went home to prepare his case as a conscientious objector. After the war, Clem went on to become Prime Minister, Tom could not find employment as an architect because he was shunned for his beliefs.

Clem and Tom were both members of the Independent Labour party. But while Clem saw it as his absolute duty to fight – he was in his 30s in 1914, so quite old to be signing up – Tom took a very different view. He believed that war could never be the Christian answer to any dispute – he was prepared to suffer for what he believed in, just as his brother was.

Tom was court-martialled in 1917, did three months' hard labour in Wormwood Scrubs followed by a year in Wandsworth prison. Clement, meanwhile, had been invalided back from the front so that when the armistice was signed in 1918, Ellen Attlee, their mother, had two sons in Wandsworth: one in the military hospital, the other in prison, her comment was that she didn't know which one of her sons made her prouder.

I and many of us, wear red poppies to remember all those who died or whose lives were torn apart by war and the work done by the British Legion to help the bereaved and the injured. I and many of us, wear white poppies to remember all those whose lives have been destroyed by war whatever their nationality, belief or status. We wear them to say we have to find a better way than war to sort out our differences. In the silence we are here to hold in the light of God's love all those who have suffered and also to bring into that light those emotions, attitudes and prejudices in ourselves which lie at the heart of destructive conflict. In the silence let us ask ourselves what we are doing to bring reconciliation between individuals, groups and nations.

We are here to worship, to offer to God thankfulness that we are alive and free to meet with one another, to lament that so many have died and peace has not come, and to intercede with God that we may learn what it is, in the prophet Micah's words, for no one to be afraid but for each to sit under their own vine and rest in the shade of their fig tree. We are here to say to the God of us all, we do not know how to love our enemies, we don't understand how to pray for those who persecute us, but we believe that You are our God and You can teach us how to turn swords into ploughshares, how to spend our tax on health, education and housing not nuclear weapons and drones.

We are not here to enumerate statistics but one short list may perhaps be added. Since 1st January this year, 2018, 36,000 people have been killed in conflict in Afghanistan, 26,500 in Syria, 26,000 in Yemen, 13,500 in Mexico and over 4,000 people in Iraq.

1914 – 1918, the war to end all wars...

Revd Caroline Homan