

100 years ago tomorrow is the centenary of the first Armistice Day commemorations. 11 November 1919 was the first anniversary of the official end of the First World War. It became an annual commemoration until the Second World War when, due to the pressure to keep the supply factories working, the commemoration was moved to the nearest Sunday. In 1945 the decision was taken to move the commemoration permanently to the Second Sunday in November so that it could honour the fallen of the Second World War as much as the First. So Remembrance Sunday was born.

Some of us who were in ministry in the 1990s thought that Remembrance Sunday commemorations might fade away as those who fought in the Second World War began to die. But the reverse has happened and in many towns Remembrance Sunday continues to be very well supported by people who are not regular churchgoers. Typically between 4-500 people would attend the service at Crediton. Of course the main commemoration here is focused at the Cathedral and Northernhay Gardens but it is good that in our smaller church gatherings we should also remember those who have died in war, and those who have been deeply affected by its consequences. Our nation's subsequent involvement in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan alerted a new generation to the horrors of armed conflict. And although those who return injured are far fewer than in the World Wars their plight is widely publicized and their cause has been taken up by high profile figures. So Remembrance Sunday continues to have its place in our nation as a time to remember those who have died in war and to pray for peace in our time.

It is almost impossible for us to imagine what it must have been like for those who had endured the years of conflict from 1914 -18 to return home just over 100 years ago. But there are some remarkable diaries of service personnel recording their thoughts at the time. Lieutenant Richard Dixon of the Royal Field Artillery wrote recalling the horror of his experience ...

The war is over! It's over! No more slaughter, no more maiming, no more mud and blood, no more killing and disembowelling of horses and mules. No more of those hopeless dawns, with the rain chilling the spirits, no more crouching in inadequate dugouts scooped out of trench walls, no more dodging snipers' bullets, no more of that terrible shell fire. No more shovelling up of bits of men's bodies and dumping them into sandbags.

and then he realised that the whole outlook for his life had changed....

An unreal thought was running through my mind. I had a future. It took some getting used to – this knowledge. There was a future ahead for me, something that I had not

imagined for some years. All that mattered was that the war was over, and by a miracle I had come through it when so many better men had not.

But as we know the return home was for many soldiers not all that they hoped. Many were living with terrible injuries, both physical disabilities and mental trauma. Their wives and children and families often suffered too with them as they struggled to cope. And there was high unemployment and no organised Welfare State as we know it now.

But help started to be mobilised. In 1921 the Poppy Appeal, or the Earl Haig Fund as it was originally called, was started employing disabled veterans to make poppies to be sold to commemorate the war dead and to provide assistance to the living. There are some moving stories of those, young and old, who have received help recently on the Royal British Legion's website.

Other local schemes were instituted too. By 1915 injured servicemen were returning to Devon and in Crediton a place was created called Upper Deck was created at the of the town where they could go to enjoy the fresh air and lovely views to aid their recovery.

This idea that wider Society had a responsibility to treat former members of the armed forces fairly was enshrined in the Armed Forces Covenant which was adopted in the year 2000. Although it is not legally enforceable it does represent an important principle in Britain that we all share a measure of responsibility for the work of our forces.

Remembrance Sunday falls within the season of the Saints in our modern church calendar, a season which begins with All Saints Day on November 1st and continues through to Advent Sunday. November 2nd has, for more than thousand years been kept as All Souls Day, a time when people remember their loved ones who have died, even though they may not have been great saints! So Remembrance Sunday sits appropriately within this season as we not only look back to horrors of past conflicts and pray for our current leaders but try to set it all within the context of God's eternal love and purposes for us.

In the wonderful short reading from Job we hear words that were made famous in Handel's Messiah. "I know that my redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been destroyed, then in my flesh shall I see God." It is one of the passages in the Old Testament that prefigures our Christian belief in the resurrection. As Christians we know that our redeemer lives and that one day, beyond our life here, we will come to life with him.

Yesterday among the fallen leaves and soggy grass in our garden I spotted a small primrose with its flowers shining brightly. In the same way our faith constantly brings us fresh hope that life will be renewed and restored. The love which God has for us, and

has shown us in Jesus, cannot be extinguished by the worst which the world can do. Even amongst the horrors of war there are often acts of compassion and heroism which keep faith and hope alive. So in our present days when we are plunged into conflict at home and to be fighting an ever more urgent global war against climate change, the greatest challenge for us is be agents of hope, love and compassion.

I'd like to finish with a quotation from The Fellowship of the Ring by Tolkien who served his time in the trenches of the First World War yet kept his Christian faith:

“The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.”