

## **St Peter & St Paul's Godalming**

November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008

### **Remembrance Sunday ~ Micah 4: 1 - 4**

---

This Remembrance Sunday marks the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the First World War – when the armistice between Germany and allied powers came into effect at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918. We come together to remember. But remember what exactly?

As I look around, I'm pretty sure that almost no-one here was even born in 1918. And I can assure some of the younger people here that many of us – myself included – weren't even born by the end of WW2. So what does remembering mean to you? For some here the memories are very close and very deep: memories of battles fought, comrades killed or badly wounded, scars of body and mind that continue to this day. Memories of loved ones lost in wars even being fought as I speak. Fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, relatives and friends – killed in days past.

When I was a child brought up in the 1950s I was very conscious of the recently ended Second World War – if only because the rationing of food continued. I learnt as a young boy of the exciting adventures our soldiers, sailors and airmen:

- the brave 'few' – the spitfire and hurricane pilots who fought and won the battle of Britain;
- the outstanding naval quest to find and sink the massive German battleship, the Admiral Graf Spee at the battle of the River Plate;
- the heroic deeds of D-Day – especially of our airborne troops who captured the critical and strategic 'Pegasus' canal bridge way behind enemy lines.

But as I grew up, with my continued interest in the histories of the first and second world wars, came a steep learning curve about the horrors that war contains. This has

reinforced my gratitude to the bravery and sacrifices made by many people of past and present generations who have served and lost their lives in war – but it has also made me understand this truth: that while it may be necessary to fight in order to protect human freedoms from the assaults of aggressors, war is never good, war is always evil. War may be the lesser of evils, but it is never good.

So what do we remember on this 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a war we've never experienced? Well let's think for a moment about that armistice day 90 years ago. It brought to an end a four-year conflict in which 10 million servicemen and women from all sides died with another 21 million wounded. (And they didn't all die fighting their opponents. Many, many died of disease and sickness.)

The enormity of those numbers is almost beyond comprehension, beyond belief. So let's for a moment remember just five of them – all with one thing in common:

British soldier: Pte. George Edwin Ellison

French soldier: Augustin Trebuchon

Canadian soldier: Pte. George Laurence Price

American soldier: Pte. Henry Gunter

and Lt. Thoma of the German army.

They has all survived the war until the last day. But between the signing of the armistice agreement at 5 a.m., and the time it was to be brought into effect at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day – in just those six hours – they were all shot dead. They were the last soldiers killed from each of those countries' armies.

The Frenchman was shot 10 minutes before the ceasefire carrying a message informing forward troops about the ceasefire at 11.00, and telling them that soup would be provided for them at 11.30. The German died just after 11 o'clock as a result of a tragic mistake.

But two of them died carrying out the murderous commands to make renewed attacks on German positions which everyone knew would be rendered utterly futile within just a few hours. It is estimated that over ten thousand servicemen on all sides were killed or wounded in those six hours. What a waste.

We remember those five, and the experiences of all wars past and present – in part to honour their lives tragically cut short; but also so that we can create the peace that they all sought.

We remember them, so as not to be caught up in a child-like fascination with the heroic stories of war – as I was when I was a child.

We remember them, to understand the appalling waste of human life that war brings: the physical and psychological scars that thousands upon thousands of people carry with them today and every day. If we don't remember that, then we have failed to see what war is about.

If we do not remember the appalling human cost of military conflict and past wars, then we are likely to make the same mistakes again. As the philosopher George Santayana observed, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'

We often say at this time of year that lives were given in our wars so that we who survive them might have a better tomorrow. That remembering their sacrifice is to make sure we don't waste it. To honour them we must build a better society, a better nation, a better world.

The Christian understanding of 'peace' is more than the avoidance of war, more than the absence of conflict. It is about building relations between people, between communities, and between nations which positively and constructively creates a love and care for others founded on justice for all.

In our Bible reading we heard the vision of God's ancient prophet Micah, when he gave us one of God's pictures of hope for the future: that we should learn the ways of God, and when we do, then nations will turn weapons of war into agricultural tools – an image of the tools of destruction being used to produce life-giving abundance. A place where justice reigns for all people, where no-one will need to learn the arts and sciences of war, where all will live in peace and no-one will fear anyone else.

For as we remember the sacrifice of the many who died in conflict, in acts of bravery and utter tragedy, we need to build relationships of peace and justice in our world, starting right here in our community.

And for that we will always need God's help – to change each and every one of us, into people who have a passion for peace and justice, and a care and love for everyone. To follow Jesus' example to love our neighbour as ourselves.

**Amen.**