

Sermon – Remembrance Sunday 2019 – 10.15

There is something so evocative about the poppy, the symbol that we have used since early in the twentieth century as a sign of remembrance. As we all know, it was particularly on the battlefields of the First World War, churned up by trench warfare, that swathes of poppies grew, and the vision of those poppy fields has also been immortalised by John McCrae in his poem “In Flanders Fields.”

So many factors make the poppy a particularly apt symbol of remembrance. I’m afraid you’re going to have to forgive the History teacher in me, but one of the factors that makes Remembrance Sunday so important is that throughout history huge numbers of people have been killed in warfare. The numbers killed in the two great conflicts of the twentieth century really are horrifying. Our best estimates suggest that between 15 and 19 million people died in the First World War, with a further 23 million wounded military personnel. And if that is shocking, an estimated 70-85 million people died in the Second World War – about 3% of the 1940 population.

Just look for a moment at the image of the poppy field. Mile upon mile of poppies, creating a red stain on the countryside, utterly beautiful, yet representing on this Remembrance Sunday the scale of loss in armed conflict.

And if the scale of the historical loss is shocking, we are also called to remember those who currently serve in our armed forces, and those who are veterans of more recent conflicts. From Northern Ireland to the Falklands, Afghanistan and Iraq, to name but a few, courageous men and women continue to be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to maintain our peace and security. Today is surely a day to express our gratitude for that selfless service.

The image of the poppy, though, is not just about scale. As we zoom in on a poppy field, we start to be able to focus in on each individual flower. Each one fragile; each one unique.

The story of armed conflict is not just about the scale of loss. It is also about individuals. One of the most compelling ways to teach history is through stories of individuals. It is extraordinary the way historians have managed to discover so much about the lives of those impacted by war. Pieces of evidence that show us the range of motivations for joining up at the start of the First World War – some young men looking for excitement; others wanting to prove themselves; many enlisting with a heavy heart. The information we have about life in the trenches tells of everything from rats, trench foot and tinned food to the utter terror of the front line. None of us can really appreciate the nature of those experiences, but research has helped uncover the stories of some individuals, reminding us that Remembrance Sunday is not just about the number of lives lost en masse, but is also about individual stories. Individual stories that are precious and matter.

And having zoomed in to recognise the significance of individuals, we zoom out once more, because each casualty of war is connected to a whole network of other people. Each person lost in conflict was someone’s son or daughter, husband or wife, mother or father, aunt or uncle. Their untimely death creates a gap in someone’s family tree, and the impact of their death ripples outwards, affecting so many people whose lives are changed forever.

Many of you will remember the display of ceramic poppies at the Tower of London in 2014, created by artists Paul Cummins and Tom Piper. The artists captured that extraordinary juxtaposition between the impact of the scale of loss – the way the hundreds of thousands of poppies cascaded

into the moat at the Tower of London, like blood being spilled – together with the utter uniqueness of each hand-made poppy – representing the uniqueness of each lost life.

Remembrance Sunday can feel overwhelming. Peace can so often feel like an impossible dream, and as individuals we might feel powerless to make a difference. And that's why we have to be able to zoom in and zoom out – to recognise the magnitude of the numbers involved, but also to see the individuals. And in seeing the individuals to dare to believe that we can indeed make a difference.

Because every day we all have choices about how we treat other people, and these choices matter. We each of us choose how we conduct ourselves. How we talk to one another. How much we listen. How we respond to frustrations. A few weeks ago a friend of mine was at work when a visitor for a neighbouring office parked in a parking space belonging to their office. He went outside, asked the visitor who is was seeing, explained that he needed to use the visitor spaces and asked if he would mind moving. And the man thanked my friend for being polite instead of just shouting at him.

It's the smallest example, and isn't going to stop world conflict. But equally we have to ask questions about the extent to which our small scale arguments can end up escalating – especially when we somehow find ourselves pleasantly surprised if we are treated with kindness and respect.

We all have choices. Each and every day. So let's make our choices reflect values of respect and dignity, of peacefulness and mutual flourishing. Step by tiny step, it might just change the world – and it will certainly change life for the people around us.

Amen