

The words on the Kohima Memorial: 'When you go home, tell them of us and say: 'for your tomorrow we gave our today'.

This day is always emotional. In towns across the country, Remembrance Sunday ceremonies have followed a familiar pattern since WW1: a church service, the two minutes silence with the 'Last Post and the Reveille' and a march past. In the 1960s, when I was in the TA, the sight of service men and women in uniform was commonplace. Many of my seniors had served in WW2 and on Remembrance Sunday, also present were Old Comrades who had fought in WW1. They had known as friends some of those whose names were on the memorial. Nowadays, when uniforms are less commonly seen and far fewer people have friends and relatives in the services, the emotion though present is perhaps less intense.

Although Remembrance Sunday parades are part of the fabric of our national life, there is a sincere

minority, who decry them as glorifying war. Before WW1, war was seen in some quarters as something noble, and in the past when people had to rely on newspapers and radio, they could form their own mental picture and blank out some of the horrors of the battlefield. Today live television, even though it is edited, surely must leave us in no doubt that war is an obscenity that kills and maims not only combatants, but civilians as well, in what is euphemistically called collateral damage. War is responsible for much of the world's poverty, whose effects will blight many lives for years to come. No wonder Eric Milner White in his prayer for peace describes war as 'the waste of our wraths and sorrows'.

Remembrance Sunday however is not the occasion to rake over the causes, rights and wrongs of past conflicts, but to commemorate those men and women, caught up in the consequences of power struggles, ideological intransigence, and political and diplomatic incompetence, who gave their lives in the

service of their country in both World Wars and in ensuing years to the present day.

The day therefore is firstly about whom we remember. This will be different for each of us. The government gave a five inch bronze disc to the next of kin of those killed in WW1. On it is the figure of Britannia holding a laurel wreath, standing next to a lion; around the edge are the words 'He died for Freedom and Honour'. It was also inscribed with name of the person who had been killed. The one I have bears the name of the man who, had he not been killed on the Somme, would have been my uncle. He was 21. His name is one of 72,246 on the memorial at Thiepval, which commemorates all those killed on the Somme between 1915 and 1918, who have no known graves. In the area around the memorial, lie another 75,000 whose bodies have been found: in total they are more than the current population of the City of Norwich from where his family came.

I was born twenty years after his death and so have no memory of my mother's brother. My mother and my grandmother mentioned him from time to time, but it is only as I have got older than I have come to realise how appalling it must have been in the days and months after they had received the telegram saying, 'missing believed killed'. There may have been some comfort that they were not alone. Time makes the immediate agony less raw. Nevertheless, those who die in combat are mostly young, and the thought of what might have been: all the joys of life they have missed and what they might have achieved, leaves a dull ache that never quite goes away. We should however not forget that this agony was just as real for the families of those who fought on the other side.

After the gospel Alex improvised on 'Banks of Green Willow' a quintessentially English piece by George Butterworth, who was shot by a sniper in 1916 and whose name is also among the unidentified dead, on the Thiepval Memorial. He was one of the most

talented musicians of his generation and had he lived might have been as well-known as his friend, Vaughan Williams. Remembrance Sunday is a public ceremony because alongside private grief, we as a nation mourn the loss of all the talents with which those who died might have enriched the world had they lived out their full span.

Is remembering just a brief, yearly exercise in nostalgia, or can we gain from it? This depends on how we remember, and here we have two choices with very different outcomes. On the one hand we can look back in anger, at the present with despair and to the future longing for retribution. When we look at the history of the last 100 years and at the horrors in the world today, it is not surprising that this is the default option for many people and nations. Trust lost between warring factions is hard to restore; peace is difficult to come by; cease-fires break down, and many people cannot see anything beyond getting their own back. Fuelled by hatred, the cycle of tit for tat goes on.

The alternative is much harder, but to look back in thankfulness; to look at the present with determination to improve things, and to the future with hope, is the only positive way forward. As a nation we have cause to be thankful. We are democratic, and we are free to hold and express many differing opinions, and to disagree with those who govern us. Our leaders are subject to scrutiny; our judiciary is independent and no one is above the law.

Wars have unforeseen good consequences. Some of the most important are intangible. I had an elderly patient who lived by himself on a smallholding in a remote part of the Lincolnshire fen. He told me his time in the trenches in WW1 was the happiest of his life because it was the only time he had been surrounded by companions. I don't wish to romanticise this, but in spite of all the horror and discomfort, along with acts of courage, many unsung, for some the time served in action was one of heightened even spiritual awareness; with intense

feelings of comradeship, a sense of duty, coupled with a healthy scepticism for authority, and determination not to let their mates down. This Sunday is an opportunity to reflect on these virtues which are so often at a discount in our individualistic world, but without which our common life cannot function, let alone improve.

More tangibly, the sheer necessities of war have enabled advances to be made rapidly. On the medical front alone, WW1 saw the beginnings of plastic and maxillofacial surgery as well as blood transfusion. WW2 gave birth to modern anaesthesia, which has since vastly extended the range of surgical possibilities; it also accelerated the large-scale manufacture of Penicillin.

Although the paradox that good sometimes spring from evil can never be a justification for war, why does it happen? Some may call it the triumph of the human spirit, but for Christians, this triumph springs from the fact that we are made in God's image. Every

Sunday is Remembrance Sunday, when we give thanks that we are redeemed by the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus, however unspeakably we may behave, and however horribly we may mar God's image. Though we can destroy one another, we cannot break God, and we can never put ourselves beyond the reach of His redeeming love.

Remembering is more than just bringing the past into the present; it is a call to keep faith with those who died. We can ensure that today's service men and women are properly supported after they leave the forces. Whilst physical rehabilitation has improved enormously and The Invictus Games have shown how those with physical injuries can be helped to overcome their wounds, many others have psychological scars that show in depression and alcohol and drug dependency. It is also a spur to do our utmost to further the cause of peace, by removing the seeds of conflict before we blow this planet to smithereens. Wars spring from injustice and inequalities of food, resources, health, education,

opportunities and access to incorrupt justice. Many of these inequalities result from the greed that makes the rich use their influence to get richer at the expense of the poor and powerless. As individuals our scope for action may be limited, but we can support organisations that work for a more just world. We can also elect politicians who do have the power to change things and we can harry them until they do.

We are right to worry about the world we shall pass on to our children and grandchildren. If we want their lives to be as good or better than ours, then for their tomorrow let us give our today.