

Remembrance Day 2016

Read by Phil Loudon

Imagine there's a tightrope stretched out above your heads. And now come and join me, up there on this tightrope. Because that's what it feels like, on Remembrance Sunday, that we're walking a tightrope, trying to balance the different themes that we want to embrace in our service.

On the one hand: a 100% longing for peace, a hatred of war, a cry to God that war may cease to be known upon earth. On the other hand: a remembrance of all those who have died in war, including those who served in the armed forces, whose lives and deaths we want to honour and give thanks for.

Those who pray above all for peace, are sometimes anxious that too great an emphasis on the courage and sacrifice of those who fought, may somehow be understood as glorifying war, making the possibility of peace more remote. Those who want to remember the courage and sacrifice are afraid, that if we emphasise peace too much, we devalue the sacrifice of those who died, and somehow suggest that their deaths were in vain.

And of course we don't want to fall off in either of those directions. We want to give full weight to both – as long as that weight is a balance, rather than one that makes us fall off.

So first: Peace.

Surely there can't be any doubt that God's real desire is peace.

No matter how much war there is in the Bible, as nations contend with each other, and the little nation of God's people struggles for survival – that's just the reality of history, the ultimate aim and promise, is that there will be peace when God's rule and God's law are fully known.

In Micah chapter 4 we read:

He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

And in Isaiah chapter 9:

For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;

and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

We believe that the Prince of Peace has come; Jesus is that Prince of Peace, bringing the possibility of reconciliation between human beings and God, or rather showing that God has given himself, made the final sacrifice of himself, in order to reconcile us to him. His grace, his undeserved love, reaching out to us, and not just some of us but all of us.

God is saying to us: Be reconciled, let's make it up, stop fighting against me, and against all the good there could be in the world, all the blessing that there could be for the whole of creation. Stop fighting, be reconciled. But we know how far the world is from hearing that message and believing it; the work of mission has only just begun; even people who call themselves Christians have not yet learned to live as God invites us to live.

And then, remembering the dead.

I remember a programme on TV last year about war. It showed a young girl looking at some pictures of her grandfather, taken during the Second World War. He's in uniform, smiling, with comrades, some of them sporting funny little moustaches, in South Africa, the Middle East, and Italy. He's 21 or 22 years old. The pictures showed these young men laughing and joking, having fun. Well, her Grandfather survived the War But when we read out the names at the war memorial earlier; we remember that many of those who went to war were even younger. They were boys, young men, sent into battle by their country and its leaders. Some of them may have been those who joined up with great excitement and enthusiasm to experience a great adventure. Some of them may have been called up when their turn came, and been terrified. We've learned a bit about how terrible conditions were in the trenches of the Western Front, and the terror and seeming hopelessness of going 'over the top'. Yet they did their duty.

Poelcapelle is in Belgium in the province of West Flanders. In a corner of Poelcapelle cemetery is a grave standing out from the 6,544 other headstones for British soldiers who died near here in the First World War.

Most of the long rows of upright marble slabs that divide the perfectly manicured lawn are unadorned but this one – on Row F, Plot 56 - is surrounded by small wooden crosses decorated by poppies.

The crosses have been placed recently by British schoolchildren of the same age as the boy buried here just over a century ago – Private 6322 John Condon, aged 14.

Pte Condon, one of thousands of lads who lied about his age to fight for his country, is recorded as the youngest soldier to die in the war.

He was killed in the Second Battle of Ypres, less than 10 miles away, when German troops used poisonous chlorine gas for the first time.

The trench he lay slumped in to escape from the artillery and grenade onslaught of the advancing enemy was drowned by a cloud of the yellow gas, tearing at the youngster's lungs and scorching his eyes.

Indistinguishable from the thousand men who died on May 24, 1915 in one of the worst massacres of the war, John's age only emerged later.

Today his grave is the most visited on the Western Front. It is believed that only the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Westminster Abbey receives more visitors.

The boy soldier had claimed he was 18 when he enlisted in his home town of Waterford, Ireland, two years before.

He was really a 12-year-old, too young to shave.



Such was the demand for soldiers that recruiting sergeants turned a blind eye to teenagers who were obviously far too young to fight.

They would tell them to come back if they naively gave an honest answer when asked their age.

In an era when most people didn't have birth certificates, it was easy to lie about your age.

And when the recruiting sergeants were being paid two shillings and sixpence (which today is almost £13) for every new recruit, they weren't going to turn many away.

If a boy was rejected from one regiment, he could simply try another one down the road.

The minimum height for recruits was 5ft 3in, so tall teenagers would have no trouble volunteering to do their bit.

It wasn't until conscription was introduced in 1916 that the tide of underage soldiers heading to the Western Front was stopped.

There are scores of military cemeteries dotting the countryside across the Flanders region.

Nearly 60,000 British troops died in the Second Battle of Ypres over a two-month period.

Six months after arriving in France with the British Expeditionary Force, John Condon met his end.

Some experts' claim John was actually aged 18. But the Commonwealth War Graves Commission still believes he was 14.

In 2016 we commemorate the 100th anniversaries of two major battles of the First World War:

The Battle of Jutland took place between the British Grand Fleet and the German High Seas Fleet on the 31st May 1916 in the North Sea, off the mainland of Denmark.

Although it was the only major naval battle of World War I, it became the largest sea battle in naval warfare history in terms of the numbers of battleships and battlecruisers engaged, bringing together the two most powerful naval forces in existence at that time. Action involving 250 ships and around 100,000 men.

And the second - fought between July and November 1916, the Battle of the Somme was one of the defining events of the First World War.

It is often remembered for the huge losses on the first day (1 July 1916) but the Somme offensive continued over the following months - a total of 141 days - and men from every part of Britain and across the Empire took part. When it was halted in November, more than 1,000,000 Commonwealth, French and German soldiers had been wounded, captured, or killed.

Some 150,000 Commonwealth servicemen lie buried in 250 military and 150 civilian cemeteries on the Somme. Six memorials to the missing commemorate by name more than 100,000 whose graves are not known.

And though historians and others still argue about the justice of various wars, we want to honour those young men and what they did; and all those who have fought and died in subsequent wars: Second World War, Korea, Northern Ireland, Falklands, Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan. That willingness to do their duty, to serve their country, to face the danger, is still a thing to honour.

But let's not be coy about this. We often talk about how they gave their lives, to cushion or conceal the truth. I don't suppose any of them wanted to die. Their lives were taken from them, often by appalling violence and with appalling cruelty and pain. And that's true also of all the other casualties of war, the civilians and the non-combatants, which is why we also remember them today: the names we read out stand for those many more thousands, millions of victims on all sides.

As we seek to do this, let me share some statistics to bring this up to date. Remembrance Sunday isn't just about remembering what we call the Great War, but all the later and still current ones. According to Wikipedias, List of ongoing armed conflicts, there are currently 16 armed conflicts causing 1000+ deaths per year, and 39 with fewer than 1000 deaths.

Most of those don't really involve us, perhaps, and some of them we will never have heard of – how many of us know where South Kordofan (Sudan) is - 1,500 people have died there so far this year, or Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia/Azerbaijan) or Donbass (Ukraine).

But what about this? During the past half-century, Britain has fought more foreign wars than any other country. This Century British troops have been sent into battle five times in six years. And since the end of WW2, British troops have been killed in action every single year except one (1968). So commemoration is just as important as ever. And as we commemorate, we remember this further statistic: Of today's 'war dead', only 1 in 10 is a soldier. 90% of the victims of war nowadays are civilians, and half of them are children. Isn't this why war has to stop? Why we need to pray and work all the harder towards that end?

Of course, we like to think, or we hope and pray that all the actions our troops are involved in at this time are peace-keeping, or peace-making, operations. If our involvement in that war succeeds in helping make a country a safer, better place for its people, is that worth the cost in lives and material resources? If we could leave Afghanistan in a condition of true peace, in which people might be free from the power of religious fanatics who shoot teenage girls in the head for wanting to go to school? Who murder women teachers, because educated women present too great a threat to the men with the guns? It's heart-breaking that this has proved to be an unwinnable war; that we have to walk away from it with no certainty that they will have that peace. Iraq is an even more tragic example, in which part of the delayed cost of getting rid of a (let's admit it) particularly nasty tyrant, apart from the lives lost and the financial cost, is the threatened extinction of Christianity in many of those middle and near eastern countries. Iraq, Syria, Egypt – all used to have important and ancient Christian churches, even though they were minorities. But now those Christians are facing such persecution and attack that many are leaving or giving up. How much is the West's willingness to go to war with those countries responsible for that outcome?

What all this recent history should encourage us to do is ask the question: Is there a better way? Is there a better way than war, or force of arms, to resolve international differences? Exponents of the just war theory say that war should only ever be a last resort. It seems to me that we have been too quick, in the last quarter-century, to resort to that last resort. It should be a last resort which, increasingly, we never go to. For the sake of those war dead, nearly half of them children. For the sake of the millions of other war victims who aren't dead, just bereaved, forced to become displaced or stateless persons who have lost every material thing they ever had. Isn't all that suffering far too high a price to pay for any victory, or more often no victory at all?

We believe that the Prince of Peace has come; Jesus is that Prince of Peace, bringing the possibility of reconciliation between all human beings, and between all human beings and God. His grace, his undeserved love, reaching out to us, and not just some of us but all of us.

This is what Jesus said:

[Matthew 26:52](#)

“Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.

[Matthew 5:44](#)

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Let me finish with this piece, written by Bill, a Second World War veteran.

The Veteran's Lament

So here we stand again. A year has passed.
Once more our sorrow turns to millions killed.

What have we learned?
What do you say to us, dear soldier
from your eternal silence?
Do you implore us to improve our killing efficiency,
to make bigger and better bombs,
condemning millions more to your sad fate?

Do you cheer us on in our blindness?
How many thousands have we added to your number, this past year?
you have taken some small step
along a different road...'

AMEN No – I hear you plead now. I hear you cry to us across the years:

'Weep not for me but for those yet unborn.
Go! – Save your own children from my fate

Go! – thank me, by walking away today
to reject the futility, the waste, and the lie
that you have repeated over and over
even as you stand
for where do your billions go,
if not to ensure far more will know the hell I knew?
It is too late for me.
I have no voice but yours,
please – speak for me.
So, when you stand here again,
when this next year has passed,
come here in certainty
that

