

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY 2018

Commemoration of the 1918 Armistice

St Michael & All Angels, Barnes

'I am feeling tired and unwell ... when will it end?'

So wrote Nurse Shirley Millard on Nov 8th 1918 – just three days before the Armistice.

Nurse Millard was an American volunteer nurse stationed in a hospital near Soissons. Shortly after her arrival, in the midst of a German offensive, she wrote, *'Terribly busy. It is all so different than I imagined'*. Yes. it was far worse that she could possibly have imagined. The reality was 3,500 wounded men arriving every night, much faster than they could be treated, transported, recover or die. Some of the injured waited 3 days and nights, without blankets in the open air, waiting for a bed:

'Hundreds upon hundreds of wounded poured in like a rushing torrent, no matter what we did, how hard we worked, it did not seem fast enough or hard enough.'

She described it as being like Dante's 'Inferno' - as if the end of the world had come.

On the morning of 11th November 1918, another nurse found herself writing a letter of condolence to the family of a young man, even as the bells of the Armistice peace rang out. *'I am glad it is over'* she says, *'but my heart is heavy as lead. I must write that letter'*. For her, for the dead man, and for his family there was nothing to celebrate that day.

Later the mother of the young soldier wrote back:

'Thank you for writing to me about my boy. It was a sad blow, but I realise how fortunate I was to have more than the short message which came from the War Department'. Your letter has been my only comfort in these terrible days. I still cannot believe I will never see him again, he was all I had. All we can say is how brave he was, and thank God there was some one good and kind to take care of him at the last. I have read your letter over and over. It seems to be all I have left of him ... my heart is too full to write more. Thank, thank you, dear friend. God bless and keep you'.

If any of us receives even one letter like that in our lifetime, then we are truly blessed.

There was a saying in the First World War: *'There are no atheists in the trenches'*.

Undoubtedly, death, and the fear of death prompted a recourse to prayer and divine protection among both troops in the field and their family and friends back home. There's nothing like mortal danger for putting you in the mood for religion, and as Voltaire observed, *'It's no time to be making enemies'*. It's easy to be cynical about this, and see it as the false consolation of religion and superstition.

But faced with the deepest realities of life and death, love and loss - the faith which was peripheral to most people's lives was suddenly thrust centre stage - and with so much evil and suffering - was itself fighting for credibility.

One Methodist Army Chaplain commented:

'Most of us felt alarmed for Christianity when war broke out ... it seemed as if it were falling to the ground ... was not the outbreak and continuance of barbarism a sign that Christianity had failed? Then came the magnificent and voluntary rally to the flag in defence of Belgium .. never before had so many offered to die for the ideals of Christianity. We saw that Christianity had stopped from the sky to the street. It had become incarnate.'

When Christ walked along the sea of Galilee and called Simon and Andrew – it was a moment of crisis. Jesus has been preaching in Galilee for some time already and in all likelihood they already knew him, had been among the crowds – but now – would they follow? Would it make a difference? What did it mean for their lives? For many people, war provoked just such a crisis of faith - either it matter a lot or not at all. Either it made a profound difference or it was totally useless.

The landscape of northern France was abundantly scattered with crucifixes – in every village and crossroads – the image of the suffering and dying body of Christ, the sign of God's sharing in humanity's pain, became relevant and meaningful in a new way. As one soldier wrote from France in 1915:

'Quite the most remarkable feature of the war is the standing up of the cross with our dear Lord upon it amidst scenes of terrible strife and distress'.

The nurses and soldiers of the Great War were trying desperately to make sense of a world which seemed to be falling apart and coming to an end. The path to victory was intertwined with the road to Hell.

It's true that, for some, disgust at the War caused them to lose their faith – but for others their experiences somehow brought them closer to God. Lorna Neil, a British Red Cross Ambulance Driver at Etaples said:

'I never said to myself there can be no God or He would never allow such things. I saw it the other way. I felt that there couldn't be heroism and suffering to no purpose. It was at that point that I really became a Christian – in the midst of all the suffering that was all around us'.

The red cross on her uniform was no longer merely a convenient sign – it was the symbol of the self-giving love of Christ, of the God who *so loved the world* that he gave his only begotten Son. That same God and that same Son knew what they were all going through because he had been there himself on the original Cross which that sign on her uniform represented.

* * *

I expect some of us have visited one of the first world war cemeteries of northern France or elsewhere.

Row upon row of identical graves and carefully tended lawn meets the eye. The mud and mess of the battlefield has been transformed into an oasis of peace.

It is strange to think that these graveyards were themselves the subject of a great battle.

The War Graves Commission believed that all the fallen should be treated equally whatever their background, rank, class or religion – this was a radical and controversial idea for the time.

The prohibition on private exhumation for burial back home, and then the prevention of individual memorials caused an enormous outcry. Week in and week out, the pages of the newspapers were filled with the anguished letters of bereaved families. One said: *'Never before in the history of man has a parent or widow been deprived the right to show their love by a personal memorial'.*

The scale of the tragedy that had unfolded meant finding an entirely new way to honour the dead.

There could be no more eloquent argument against war than its cemeteries.

Yet the neatly ordered rows of graves are themselves a fanciful fiction. Imposing upon the chaos of war, the desirable order of the parade ground. *'Good God, did we send people to fight in that?'* one general is supposed to have wept when he saw the swampland of Ypres for the first time – the peaceful cemeteries seems to offer the reassuring answer 'No'. But it isn't true.

To some extent, such memorials and cemeteries enable us to forget as much as to remember.

Now that there are no more veterans of the First World War, and those of the second are fast dwindling, we must be careful not to make our remembering a kind of forgetting. A creation of the past as we would wish it to be.

The greatest and most effective monument of both wars, is not found among the gravestones of northern France, or in the countless memorials in every village and church across the land.

It is in fact the European Union.

A continent of people and nations brought together to *'make war unthinkable and materially impossible'*.

After two world wars in less than half a century, it has shown its effectiveness in this regard through 70 largely peaceful years. – such that most of us have not just forgotten, but never known what war is like.

Many are now predicting the death of that post-war settlement, and the future is uncertain. As we prepare to leave that Union next year, let us show that we remember not the comforting fiction of war, but its terrible reality. There can never be a *'them and us'*, or this commemoration of the Armistice will have been betrayed.

Let us honour the countless dead on every side by making sure that there can never be such hatred between our brothers and sisters, our neighbours and our friends.