

Remembrance Sunday 2017

St Michael & All Angels, Barnes.

MEMORIAL CHAPEL

Later in this service we will rededicate our Memorial Chapel and All Souls Altar. It has been restored for a while now, but today, Remembrance Sunday, seems the right day to rededicate it -

Because, the plaques beside it record those who died in war, and on the Altar is a record of them.

Here is typical entry:

Wallace Jackson

Corporal, Wiltshire Regiment.

Born August 1882 in Essex.

Son of Josiah and Agnes Jackson

Of 126 Upper Richmond Road

A brick maker.

Posted to France November 1914

Killed in action on the Somme on 7th July 1916

Aged 33

With no known grave

he is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial.

Here was a person just like us:

With a history and a home,

with parents and a job.

Who lived, and died,

with no known grave,

But not forgotten -

Remembrance Day stands for the abiding memory of God's love.

WARTIME IN BARNES

It is understandable that we should think more of those who went away to war, and those who died doing so. But we remember rather less often what it was like for those left behind, and those who died *here*.

Local historian Tom Stanier has collected the memories of Barnes residents who lived through World War II. One of them, Mary Grimwade, wrote this in her diary in September 1939:

“Sheila and I picked blackberries while Freddie and Mrs Thompson played golf. There is an anti-aircraft encampment in the middle of the golf course, complete with gun, searchlight and sound detector, and a soldier who watches every plane which passes overhead. All this makes the play of the 9th hole a little complicated.”

There is a strange blend of the normality even in the midst of war: of playing golf, picking blackberries and anti-air-craft guns.

A year later in August 1940, Mary remembers the interruptions that the war brought:

“Not many at church today, and afterwards I went over to Humphrey’s for lunch. We were in the middle of our first course at about 1.10 when a raid warning went off and we all went to the shelter until 2pm. Then we returned and ate blackberry and apple tart.”

Blackberries again! But life had become much more serious – and dangerous.

Another local man, Frank Wood recorded his memories of living through air raids and a bomb that fell just a few feet from his house in Vernon Road:

“It seemed a comparatively quiet night and just after midnight I turned in. I knew nothing more until I awoke not half an hour later, and what an awakening! The house was falling about all over the place! ... I switched on my torch, handy under my pillow and managed to get to the light switch. Fortunately, this went on but revealed utter chaos....”

Frank went out to see how others were doing. He noticed the “roofless houses of Church Avenue” which impressed themselves on his mind. He goes on:

“Suddenly I was asked for the occupants of No 10 Mr and Mrs Bates lived there according to my Register, and it appeared that their house was completely destroyed. Mr Bates was away from home it appeared, but Mrs Bates’ body was subsequently recovered.”

Death could come at any moment, even as you slept in your bed.

WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS

It is in this context that we should consider today's Gospel of the Wise and Foolish Virgins.

The virgins, or bridesmaids, are waiting to welcome the bridegroom home. Where is he and what is he doing?

He is signing the wedding contract, agreeing the dowry with his new father-in-law.

But he has been delayed.

Clearly there has been a disagreement, perhaps an argument, it has taken longer than expected. A conflict is going on elsewhere.

The bridesmaids are waiting for the groom's return and the celebrations of the wedding night.

It is a Gospel that speaks of the fear of being forgotten and of being cast out: *'I do not know you'* says the Bridegroom to those whose lamps have gone out.

It can seem like a harsh Gospel to us but I'm sure it resonated for those lived through war time:

A sense of waiting,

Of unexpected arrival

Of the need to be ready.

For the arrival and return of husbands, brothers, fathers.

Or arrival of something else.

Of a black-edged letter.

Of a bomb on your home.

And yet, keeping alert.

Who is this parable meant to judge?

Those who have only darkness to offer.

CARRYING LIGHT OR BRINGING DARKNESS

Most of you will have heard the famous words of Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary at the start of the first world war, who wrote in his diary:

"A friend came to see me on one of the evenings of the last week — he thinks it was on Monday, August 3rd. We were standing at a window of my room in the Foreign Office. It was getting dusk, and the lamps were being lit in the space below on which we were looking. My friend recalls that I remarked on this with the words: "The lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our life-time."

During both wars, individuals had a sense of keeping the light of faith, hope and love going in a darkened world - as one of the most famous wartime songs records:

*'Keep the home fires burning
While your hearts are yearning
Through your lads are far away
They dream of home.
There's a silver lining
Through the dark clouds shining
Turn the dark cloud inside out
Till the boys come home.'*

But of course, many of them didn't.

And those who did sometimes found their homes – and families - destroyed. The poet Edward Thomas, himself killed in the first world war, wrote the poem 'In Memoriam (Easter 1915)' about that sense of destruction and loss:

*'The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood
This Eastertide/ call into mind the men,
Now far from home,/ who with their sweethearts, should
Have gathered them/ and will do/ never again.'*

THE SILENCE OF CHRIST

'Never again' is how Thomas ends his poem.

This day pierces us with the bleak remembrance of all the bitterness and waste of war.

And so we keep silence, and try to create a semblance of the lost peace they were fighting for.

But our silence is filled with noise and whispers, of the world around us, but also of the restless rumour of new wars, in North Korea, in Lebanon.

Even as we keep silence, conflict is happening.

No moment is unscarred, no moment is peaceful or innocent.

So we keep silence before this sombre reality.

This, and another reality:

That there is only one silence that redeems all our violence and blood.

Only the silence of a dying God – hanging from a Cross – who remembers us and loves us.

With thanks to Malcolm Guite's sonnet - 'Remembrance Day'.