

How do you feel as you stand in a trench
 Awaiting the whistle to blow?
 Are you frightened, anxious, shaking with fear
 Or are you ready to go?
 No one is anxious to go, my friend
 It's a job which must be done
 Discipline ensures we obey the rules
 Though for many their last day has come.

Me! I'm scared! Though I try not to show it
 It's my third time over the top
 I'm a lover of peace but the bullet don't know it
 I could be getting the chop!
 May the Good Lord grant me a nice Blighty wound
 One which allows me to run
 Out of this shambles, I've had quite enough
 Let 'The Butcher' keep his fun.

That's how we feel as we stand in a trench
 Awaiting the whistle to blow
 Those are the thoughts which pass through our heads
 Emotions we are not keen to show
 All men react in different ways
 Few to heroics aspire
 But should a man boast that he never knew fear
 Then, in my book, that man is a liar!

This rather clumsy poem entitled 'Zero Hour' was written by a soldier, Sergeant H Fellows, at the Battle of the Somme. The poem exposes heartfelt fear. There was nothing glorious about trench warfare. Wilfred Owen's poem, *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, more eloquently destroys the old lie that war is glorious and seemly.

Where is the glory in standing in a trench of ice cold water, day after day, in the freezing cold, with men huddling together at night for warmth? At the Battle of Krithia (at Gallipoli) in 1915, a private in the Australian Brigade recalled how, while under heavy bombardment from the Turks, one Turkish soldier reached his trench. The private wrote:

He came over bawling some Muslim phrase and me and the fellow next to me shot him at the same time. He was a very big man and came down on top of me and none of us could lift him out, he was too heavy. So I literally sat on that Turk for two days – we ate our lunch of bully beef and biscuits on him.

Where is the glory in stories of men tormented night and day by lice and rats?

When we remember the sacrifices of our fellow human beings in two world wars and many conflicts since, we remember the harsh, unpleasant, dehumanising reality of it.

Some years ago, in a BBC programme entitled ‘Great Britons’, a table of great British heroes was compiled. The Unknown Warrior was at number 76. It is perhaps to our credit as a nation that an unknown Briton was in the list at all. On the other hand, it is perhaps a disappointment that the listing was so low. The story of the Unknown Warrior is that in 1920 the Dean of Westminster Abbey proposed to Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson that the body of a private ranking soldier (not identified) be exhumed in France and brought back to

Britain for burial with full honours in Westminster Abbey. France was chosen because so many had died there. A plain stone was to be placed over the body carrying the words, 'Here lies the body of an unknown British warrior'. 'Warrior' rather than 'soldier' was used so as to include those who had died in the Navy and Air Force.

The body of the unknown and unnamed warrior was laid to rest at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month 1920. The body was buried in soil brought from France because that was where the man had died. The King scattered some of that soil over the coffin at the burial service. The British newspaper, the *Daily Chronicle*, carried this tribute:

It did not seem an Unknown Warrior whose body came on a gun carriage down Whitehall where we were waiting for him. He was known to us all. It was one of our 'boys' – not warriors – as we called them in the days of Darkness lit by faith....To some women, weeping a little in the crowd after an all night vigil, he was their own boy who went missing one day and was never found till now.... To many men wearing ribbons and badges on civil clothes, he was a familiar figure, one of their comrades.

By the end of the Great War Britain had suffered 908,371 dead, 2,090,212 wounded and 191,652 missing. Victory, it was said, had been 'bought so dear as to be indistinguishable from defeat'.

A biographer of Winston Churchill, William Manchester, said that when news of the First World War ended, Churchill, who was a member of the British Cabinet, made his way to Downing Street to congratulate the Prime Minister. At the meeting, Churchill spoke movingly for the ‘fallen foe’: they were close to starvation and he pleaded that Britain send ‘a dozen great ships crammed with provisions’ to Hamburg, but the proposal was rejected. Manchester went on to say that, around the time Churchill’s proposal was being rejected, a twice decorated German non-commissioned despatch runner – temporarily blinded in a gas attack – sat injured in a military hospital as he heard of his country’s plight. Six years later, that German soldier wrote:

I knew that all was lost. Only fools, liars and criminals could hope for mercy from the enemy. In these nights hatred grew in me, hatred for those responsible for this deed....The more I tried to achieve clarity on the monstrous events in this hour, the more the shame of indignation and disgrace burned my brow. What was all the pain in my eyes compared to this misery? In the days that followed, my own fate became known to me....I resolved to go into politics.

The soldier’s name was Adolf Hitler. The seeds of the Second World War were sown in a people and a person.

Remembrance Sunday, Remembrance Day, is partly about remembering the past, those who have died, and the horrors of war. It is also about the future. We honour those who have died best by living in a manner that ensures we do

not repeat the mistakes of the past. In the Old Testament, once the Hebrew slaves had escaped Egypt, Moses told the people, 'Do not despise an Egyptian'. Moses wanted the people to be truly free; both physically free and free of the destructive memory of their slavery.

The memory of violence suffered personally or by those we love can so easily fuel feelings of revenge. The call of Jesus to love our enemies is not cowardly acquiescence; it is a call to see our enemy as people, human beings. It is a call to break the cycle of violence. Violence begets violence; revenge begets revenge. Revenge can be seen as respectable because it seems to honour those who have suffered or died. However, Jesus sought to break that cycle. The former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, says, 'Hating the German people will not bring back to life one victim of the Holocaust'.

If Remembrance tells us anything at all, it is that we have a duty to the future: to work tirelessly for peace, working always to make friends out of enemies, and seeing humanity in the eyes of those with whom we profoundly disagree. The teaching of Jesus, spoken in a world far more brutal and ruthless than our own, is as valid now as it was then.

Amen.