

## KNOWN AND UNKNOWN

This worthless little book is the most precious thing I own. It's called *Daily Light*, and it contains short readings from the Bible. It's khaki in colour, and has a small union flag embossed on the front. Inside, in beautiful handwriting, the personal dedication reads, "*Wishing you God-speed. 1916.*"

The book was given to my grandfather just before he went off to fight in the First World War Battle of the Somme. Granddad was a private in the 4<sup>th</sup> Army, Royal Artillery. His job was to look after a gun pulled by a team of horses. He was afraid of horses for the rest of his life, and would cross the road to avoid them. When I flick through these pages, I see splashes of mud from the banks of the River Somme.

Twenty-six years later, Granddad gave the book to my father, just before he went off to fight in the Second World War Battle of El Alamein in Egypt. Dad was a private in the 8<sup>th</sup> Army (the desert rats) and, like his father, his job was to do with transport, but this time mechanised. Dad was a motorcycle despatch rider in the Royal Corps of Signals. He loved motorbikes for the rest of his life, and constructed over forty from parts. When I flick through these pages, grains of sand from the North African desert fall into my lap.

My grandfather and father survived their battles; otherwise I wouldn't be standing here this morning. Some of you will know of members of your families who were not as lucky.

Today, we largely commemorate the dead of two World Wars. When we consider this, we mostly think about the *Second* World War. That's understandable; after all, it was much more recent. Indeed, we may have ageing relatives who participated. We are aware of some of the events – the Battle of Britain, the

Blitz, the Normandy landings and the dropping of the Atomic bomb.

Some of the places have been elevated, over time, from mere geographical sites to powerful symbols – Dunkirk, Kiev, Auschwitz and Hiroshima to name just four. And two of the most haunting movies of modern times, *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan* have brought us face to screen with some of the horrors!

We consider Hitler to be the embodiment of evil – a ruthless tyrant wed to insane racial theories. By contrast, if we think of Kaiser Wilhelm II at all, and most of us probably don't, we don't have such a clear-cut image. The First World War is remote. (All of the Tommies are now dead.) For many it was a futile war, a war which we "*slithered into*" (to use Lloyd George's phrase), a war without aims, a war in which men were unnecessarily sacrificed, a war caricatured as "*lions being led by donkeys*," a war open to parody, as Rowan Atkinson did so brilliantly in the final *Blackadder* series. In short, a tragic war we should all forget.

And yet all of the trappings of this Remembrance Sunday are those of the First World War. The poppies you are wearing are symbolic of those that grow in the fields of Flanders, where so many young men died and were buried between 1914 and 1918. The charity for war widows was founded by Field Marshal Douglas Haig, whose statue stands in the grounds of his old school, just 250 metres from where you are sitting. And Armistice Day, the 11<sup>th</sup> November, marks the date in 1918 when the guns finally fell silent at 11am.

This year, of course, is the centenary of the start of what used to be referred to as the Great War. And there have already been many poignant and emotional commemorations of this across the country.

At the second battle of Ypres in 1915, a Canadian Medical Officer pencilled a few verses on a page torn from his despatch book. Colonel John McCrae's poem, *In Flanders' fields*, has since become a powerful and evocative anthem. It compels remembrance of a lost generation, and the cause for which they sacrificed their lives. The final verse pleads:

*Take up our quarrel with the foe;  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high,  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders' fields.*

We wear our paper poppies with pride today. We identify, however inadequately, with those who waded through Passchendaele mud; who hacked through Burmese jungles; who marched across the windswept gorse of the Falkland Islands, or who, until just a few weeks ago, trod carefully along the I.E.D. laden tracks of Afghanistan. We try to imagine being in convoy in the chilly waters of the North Atlantic, or sitting nervously in the cockpit of a Lancaster bomber, a Spitfire fighter or a Harrier jet.

Today's appropriate honouring of the courage and commitment of our fellow countrymen and women should not blind us to the fact that the First World War was described by the sadly misplaced dictum, "*The war to end all wars.*" Over 300 wars and 200 million deaths later, it is obvious that humanity has failed to read the script.

Perhaps we have 'broken faith' with McCrae's generation? We have not learned the lesson that they taught us. Maybe we have let them down – not in our failure to take up arms, but in our failure to find peaceful solutions to our political problems. The League of Nations and now the United Nations have fallen short of their primary objective – to beat Micah's nationalistic swords

into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks, to create a more peaceful world. McCrae and his friends fought and died so that there should never have been Falklands' fields to accompany Flanders' fields in the history books.

We began this sermon by thinking about Gilbert Taplin senior (always known as Gil), and Gilbert Taplin junior (always known as Bert). Let's now move from the known to the unknown. At the west end of the Nave in Westminster Abbey is the grave of the Unknown Warrior. The Warrior represents all combatants (Army, Navy and RAF), from any part of the British Isles, who have no memorials or marked graves. The grave in the Abbey contains soil from France and it is covered by a slab of Black Belgian marble. The inscription reads:

*Beneath this stone rests the body  
Of a British warrior  
Unknown by name or rank  
Brought from France to lie among  
The most illustrious of the land...*

The original idea for the Unknown Warrior came to an Army Chaplain at the front in 1916. In a back garden at Armentières, he spotted a grave with a rough wooden cross on which were pencilled the words, 'An Unknown British Soldier'. Today, the grave has become a powerful symbol of remembrance for all those who have died in all wars before and since. Many other countries also have their own version of the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior. You may well have seen others in other European countries, or indeed in the United States of America.

Have you ever considered what the difference is between *memory* and *remembrance*? *Memory* concerns the recollection of facts. But, *Remembrance* describes a much more profound process. To remember is to invite the past into the present. When we do this, people, places and shared experiences can be so valued and cherished that greater meaning, depth and joy are

brought to our lives today. We have renewed strength and hope for tomorrow.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 11, St Paul gave instructions on how the Holy Communion should be conducted in churches – in *remembrance* of Christ. Now, the N.T. Greek word for ‘remembrance’ is *anamnesis*, which is more than mere commemoration; it means a sacramental presence. In other words, the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are so movingly recalled and celebrated that they have the spiritual power to transform lives in the present. Remembrance can be holy ground.

Is not our national celebration of Remembrance similar? By reflecting upon the deaths of millions in the wars of last century and this, we can be morally empowered not to let such evil happen again.

So today, we remember and pay tribute to those personally-known, those widely-known and those unknown. Relatives, friends, and those who died in anonymity far from home. Today, we give thanks for those who, in the words of the inscription in Westminster Abbey:

*Gave the most that Man can give – life itself  
For God  
For Sovereign and Country  
For loved ones at home  
For the sacred cause of justice and the freedom of the world.*