



Truro
Cathedral
sacred space, common ground

11 November 2018 Remembrance Sunday on the Hundredth Anniversary of the end of the First World War

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row...

In the summer of 1915 a Canadian physician, John McCrae tended a wounded colleague following the Second Battle of Ypres. Sadly, his soldier friend died, but inspired by the poppies that grew in the mud almost spontaneously after the battle, McCrae was inspired to write the poem which began with those lines. Even though he is not numbered among the great War Poets, nevertheless McCrae's words gained an emblematic reputation. For in November 1918, as the War shuddered to a halt, an American academic, Moira Michael, inspired by McCrae's poem, vowed to wear a silk poppy as a symbol of remembrance for those who fought and died in the War. After the War was over, she hit upon the idea of encouraging people to buy paper poppies to raise funds for disabled veterans, the idea was adopted by the American Auxiliary League as well as the British Legion Appeal Fund, later to become the Royal British Legion, and poppies have been sold in likewise manner ever since. John McCrae, though, did not live to see his words become the stimulus behind this iconic symbol of remembrance; he died of complications arising from influenza in January 1918.

No other flower has greater symbolic value than the poppy. It will always be the plant of remembrance, of remembering. But it is also the plant of dreams; its Latin name is *papaver somniferum*, and its scent has for a long time been associated with sleep; as Keats puts it, we are made 'drowsy with the fume of poppies.' Its anaesthetic properties have been known for centuries: for a long time fields of poppies have been constantly grown to extract the white, milky substance used to make, in the first instance, laudanum, and then morphine.

However, this leads to darker, more frightening associations: the word 'morphine' derives from Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams, whose gift wasn't always sweet. You see, dreams, under Morpheus' wilful influence, could soon turn to nightmares. And how did he induce people into a sleepy state? Why, with the drowsy fume of poppies, great swathes of which were scattered around the entrance to his cave. And we all know what great swathes of poppies can also yield: the milk of the poppy can

also deliver opium and its deadly derivative, heroin. It is deeply ironic that British soldiers serving in Helmand province in Afghanistan were involved in, first of all, destroying poppy fields, and then, when it was realised that they were essential for the local economy, and if they destroyed them they could drive impoverished people who depended on the poppy's malevolent harvest, into terrorism, protecting them. The sinister trade of opium production could not easily be overcome.

Dreams turning to nightmares. A descent into deadly addiction. That could well be a summary of what happened in 1914, where an assassin's bullet in Sarajevo precipitated a collective cultural breakdown, leading to an uncontrollable bloodbath of catastrophic proportions. The nightmare made worse because it wasn't a nightmare at all. It was very real. And certain names will forever be associated with a living hell: Ypres, the Somme, and Passchendaele (the 'worst of the lot' as it was described by many people who endured it).

So, what actually are we remembering? Why do we wear our poppies each fortnight before 11th November? Is it to remember *this*, the nightmare? No. But neither is to remember a glorious victory, for there isn't much glory in having swathes of young men being mown down by machine-gun bullets. Relief that the bloody mess was over? At the time, yes. As the eleven chimes rang out on church bells on the eleventh day of the eleventh month there was no great acclamation that 'We had won the War!', only a numbed thankfulness that the dreadful conflict was over. It is definitely to remember those who never came back, innocent men caught up in the argument of others, and who were slaughtered in their countless thousands for reasons that soon became forgotten. But equally there is the need not to forget. Not to forget the hideous consequences of what happens when a push-button process is started, and we can't prevent the descent into the nightmare and the addictive violence, and how millions of people get caught up in its malevolent rush. And in a world *today* where tensions are on the rise, this is a lesson from history we must never forget.

So, we wear our poppies with a mixture of pride and determination. And we shouldn't let the hypnotic, narcotic characteristics of poppies have the last word. For poppies have two related, remarkable qualities. They will grow anywhere, from the Arctic to the foothills of the Himalayas. And, though they are fragile and vulnerable, just like many of the men who went off to War, they soon come again; they may fall like so much red rain in the mud, yet from the earth come new plants, determined to unfurl their papery petals once more, symbolising new life, fresh hope, a happier remembrance.

This echoes the human spirit that, although mown down on an industrial scale in the War, was never quite extinguished. Peter Jackson, the film director behind *The Lord of the Rings*, has produced a documentary, called *They Shall Not Grow Old*, in which he takes live footage of the soldiers of the Front, colours the film, and gets lip-readers to read what the soldiers were actually saying, and has actors dubbing their words. The

results are awe-inspiring and uplifting. It wasn't all doom and gloom, fatalistic resignation and despair. There was humour, there was resilience, there were enormous acts of kindness. For many men on the front-line there was an equal determination *not* to let the sheer madness of the situation dictate how they would live, even though they knew they might soon die. This film is on BBC 2 tonight at 9.30, and I would urge you to see it.

If I am at all qualified to say anything as a minister of religion at an occasion like this, it is to echo the hope of new life that will never be extinguished. It is not a hope founded on a warped dream or on a narcotic view of the universe – Karl Marx once famously said that religion is the opium of the people. Nothing could be further from the truth, for the lived experience of Jesus meant that he does not provide a panacea, an escape from the nightmare, but an engagement with it, upheld, as he was, by the love of God, a love that was courageously borne by so many chaplains at the Front. In the middle of hell, you don't need an explanation why hell exists, you just need the comfort and reassurance of loving, faithful, human support, and that is what many men received and gave in abundance.

In Flanders fields the poppies did grow, symbolising a resilient beauty, a refusal to let death be the last word. And that refusal, that hope takes on many forms. The social consequences of the War meant that many women became lifelong widows or never had husbands. That is a consequence that connects me directly to the War. You see, my mother's father died on the way back from Serbia in 1915 on a troop ship of blood poisoning. My mother was a few months old, and she never knew her father, nor I my maternal grandfather.

But the flowers bloomed again, children *were* born to a scarred generation, ensuring that a new generation would arise from the carnage of war. For girls born after the War one name became more popular than others as the shattered country tried to regain something of its composure following the devastation of the conflict, a name which was synonymous with a fragile flower that grew up from the mud. That name was Poppy.

The Very Rev'd Roger Bush

Dean of Truro