

Remembrance Sunday

1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18 / Matthew 25: 1-13

Lord, take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire with love for Yourself,. Amen

Today is a day for remembering – for looking back – with thanks and appreciation but also with hindsight and learning, with sorrow and compassion especially for any who are still feeling the effects of war and those whose lives are shattered by terror and fear as they live within its reality.

Today is a day for looking forward – to when all war will be ended; when peace will reign supreme, when there will be no more sorrow, pain, suffering or injustice. And even death itself will be defeated. I believe this will only be fully realised when God's Kingdom, that Kingdom based on love and demonstrated by Jesus is truly established. We've had the first instalment in Jesus' life and death which was the supreme sacrifice for all and through which he conquered death and rose triumphantly – but we await its ultimate fulfilment for all people.

So today could be seen as a day of waiting – and most of us aren't that good at waiting!

In the story Jesus told - which we've just listened to - we heard about 10 bridesmaids who were waiting for the bridegroom to arrive so they could begin the wedding celebrations. But things didn't go as planned; they often don't. The bridegroom was delayed and they were kept waiting longer than they anticipated.... and that had serious consequences. Five of the bridesmaids were prepared for the unexpected; they had taken extra oil to keep their lamps alight and they were ready; but the other five were not so wise. They just weren't prepared and their last minute arrangements didn't come together in time so they ended up missing out.

As I thought about this story – I wondered how I could link it to the wars and particularly the life experiences of the Higher Bebington Heroes I'd been reading about in Dave Horne's book.

For them so many things didn't go as planned – so much was different from what they expected. No doubt they had been caught up in the excitement and thrill of signing up. There was such enthusiasm and comradeship among the willing volunteers – as friends together they were ready to give up everything for their country.

Higher Bebington has a record it can well afford to be proud of, for we understand there is no single man remaining in the district who is eligible for service in H M Forces – so read an article in the Birkenhead Advertiser on 1st March 1916. All have joined either the Army or the Navy and the one exception is a man ineligible for service having lost the fingers of one of his hands. We doubt whether there is any other district in the country that can lay claim to such a distinction, and it is a credit to the residents that there should have been such a magnificent response to the "call" by the single men.

But I wonder how many were really prepared for what they were going to face? Was their training sufficient for what they would endure? Were they adequately equipped?

Can you imagine the horrendous anticipation that must have filled their minds when friends, comrades and brothers didn't come back from the frontline that they would face the next day? Were they truly ready?

It really grieved me reading some of their stories – particularly men who survived horrific injuries only to be returned to the front line. What fear must have filled their minds as they stared at death once again?

And then I thought of the wives, children, mothers, grandmothers longing, praying for their return. No doubt making themselves busy so there could be some semblance of life here but all the while dreading the arrival of a telegram which would tell them that not just one but all three sons had been killed. Were they ready for that? Could you ever be prepared?

We will recall the names of those from this parish who died in the two world wars – but let's also pause to think about those who survived but were traumatised for life, who could never again sleep peacefully or even talk of their experiences. And their beloved ones at home who had so longed for their return only to discover that they were no longer the same person who had left them. Were they ready for that?

Are we ever ready for what the world throws at us? Can we ever be ready for death – ours or those we love? And what about that painful separation from our loved ones that death brings?

Two millennia ago the first Christians were concerned that those who had died would miss out on God's eternal Kingdom. They expected Jesus to return and establish his kingdom in their lifetime –but they were still waiting. The Apostle Paul wrote words of encouragement to them. Paul was fully confident that for all who believe in Jesus, death is not an end but a gateway through which we will be reunited with each other and Jesus himself. He was confident because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because Jesus rose from the dead he had a hope that sustained him through every experience of life and enabled him to be ready for anything and everything. And that can be our experience too.

John Williams was from School Lane, a choir member of this church and staff sergeant in the Church Lad's Brigade, and from what I've read he shared that confidence. On 16th June 1915, near Ypres, as he was cutting barbed wire entanglements a shell exploded nearby. He died the following day from the severe shrapnel wounds in his back. However he had written these words in his pocket book for his parents

*Soldiers must go to fight this terrible fight
I may come back, perhaps I might
If not so, may God be your guide and shining light.*

He kept his confidence in God. The Apostle Paul also wrote - Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that NOTHING ... in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen

E.Blackmore