

SERMON – BRISTOL CATHEDRAL **REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY 2020**

I Corinthians 15:50-end
John 15:9-17

Among all the larger tragedies that the pandemic has brought have been some smaller disappointments - the one-off events and milestones we have had to miss. Today, with even our familiar Remembrance events impacted by the lockdown, I'd like to talk about two important anniversaries that we will not be able to mark in 2020 in the way that was originally planned.

This coming Wednesday November 11th, Armistice Day, is the centenary of two significant events in London which have helped to form not only our Remembrance ceremonies but, I suggest, even our national identity to the present day.

The first was the unveiling of the Cenotaph – Edwin Lutyens' simple yet profound monument to the 'Glorious Dead' of the Great War and now, of course, also the focus of the nation's Remembrance for the Second World War and all conflicts since. The Cenotaph (its name taken from the Greek meaning an empty tomb) is shaped like a coffin at the top which then projects outwards until it meets the ground. It started life as a temporary plaster and wood construction, originally intended as the focal point of the Peace Parade held in July 1919, only a matter of weeks after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. But such was the draw of this short-term construction that, months later, flowers were still being laid daily at its foot.

On 11th November 1919, when the two minutes' silence for Armistice Day was held at 11am for the very first time, a crowd of ex-servicemen and bereaved family members gathered in an impromptu observance around this temporary Cenotaph. Even the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, had sent a wreath of red roses to be laid there.

From that time on it became obvious that the Cenotaph was going to have to become a permanent memorial in the middle of Whitehall. Lutyens had it reconstructed out of Portland Stone, ready to be unveiled by the King after the two minutes' silence on 11th November 1920. That first official ceremony set out the pattern for the service that is held there every year now – initially always on Armistice Day, but since the Second World War on Remembrance Sunday. This morning's ceremony will be the first time it has changed to any extent in many years.

The second event had a much shorter planning period – indeed, it was only an idea in one clergyman's head until a matter of weeks before Armistice Day 1920. During the war, Revd. David Railton, an Army Padre serving out in the trenches, had the notion of bringing back the body of one unidentified casualty to represent the many hundreds of thousands who would never come home. Eventually in 1920 he put this to the Dean of Westminster Abbey, who in turn suggested it to the Prime Minister and King George V. The King was initially very reluctant, fearing it would be mawkish and would only serve to open old wounds. But somehow the idea grew on him and, at relatively short notice, the planning for a state funeral for the 'Unknown Warrior' came about.

The Unknown Warrior was selected at random from four bodies brought from the most significant battlefields of the conflict. Once the body had been chosen, it was processed with full military honours to Boulogne and across the Channel to London.

On the morning of 11th November, the coffin of this Unknown Warrior was laid on a gun carriage and processed in state through the streets of London. It was adorned with a crusader sword from King George V's private collection as well as a standard issue Army steel helmet and webbing belt.

At the Cenotaph, just before 11 o'clock, the gun carriage halted and the King placed a wreath on the coffin. The two minutes' silence was observed: then the King unveiled the new stone Cenotaph. The funeral cortege moved off again, to be met by a guard of honour of 100 holders of the Victoria Cross at Westminster Abbey. The coffin was borne inside and a short funeral service took place. 100 women, each of whom had lost their husbands and all their sons in the war, looked on. At the end of the ceremony Queen Mary apparently lost her composure and sobbed.

What is it that made the First World War such a pivotal moment in our attitude to war and remembering those who lose their lives fighting for their country? After all, throughout history men have fought and lost their lives. In some small part, it was surely because the sheer horror of it was shown on film for the first time for all to see. But, much more significantly, the sheer scale of losses involved meant that virtually every community was impacted. By the war's end, $\frac{3}{4}$ million of our servicemen had died and $1\frac{1}{2}$ million more had been wounded. Those casualties made up 44% of those who served, and over 10% of the entire male population.

And, of course, the $\frac{3}{4}$ million who died were never going to come home for burial. In fact, by 1920 it had already been decided that, not only would they lie in corners of foreign fields where they had fallen, but that – controversially – they would all be buried with identical headstones. Many had never been identified, many were listed as missing. And, back in England, hundreds of thousands of families would be denied the closure of a family funeral and a grave to tend at home.

So on Armistice Day 1920, over a million people turned out to witness the Unknown Warrior being carried to Westminster Abbey. During the following week alone, $1\frac{1}{4}$ million people queued day and night to pay their respects to him. 300,000 floral tributes were laid at the Cenotaph, a huge mound of chrysanthemums and other flowers stretching up so high that mothers and wives clambered up it to lay their wreaths. (Poppies were only first introduced in 1921.)

The Unknown Warrior was – as his tombstone reads – buried 'among the kings': and such is his significance that every procession entering Westminster Abbey has to side-step his tomb. Even monarchs have to walk around the spot where he lies. He is 'everyman', not only representing the fallen of the First World War, but nowadays all those who lose their lives in the armed service of this country. An ordinary soldier, he is the embodiment of those words from John's Gospel – a man who laid down his life for his friends.

The Cenotaph has a different significance. It was deliberately designed without Christian inscriptions on it, so that it could be a memorial for all those who served, whatever their religion or none: an empty tomb representing, in particular, all those who had no known

grave. But, of course, it casts in stone the Christian belief that all those who perished in the service of this country 'will not all die, but... will be raised imperishable'. Today we claim that resurrection promise for our dead of both World Wars and of more recent conflicts.

The First World War has been pivotal in changing our attitudes to the consequences of armed conflict. As a nation we learned that – amongst a death-toll almost too large to count – individuals and the families they left behind mattered. Even if they are 'unknown' in their graves and listed as missing on our memorials, the fallen are known to God and to the families who mourn their loss. And the initiation of this nation's Remembrance has gone a long way to ensuring that we place more value on the individual lives of our servicemen and women than perhaps we ever did before.

In this year of pandemic, when our cherished Remembrance traditions have had to be adapted, we can only gather in mind and spirit to honour our fallen servicemen and women. Today most of us are unable to meet together as we normally would at our war memorials and in our churches. Yet still at 11am this morning we will observe the national two minutes' silence, this time standing on the very doorsteps of our homes. Even in the midst of this coronavirus lockdown, 'We will remember them'.