

Remembrance Sunday

11 November, 2018

No greater can we have than to lay down our life for our friends.

Today our service has a special focus, Remembrance Sunday. Remembrance Sunday is a big thing in Europe but here it is overshadowed by ANZAC Day. This year is different because it is 100 years since the outbreak of peace, the signing of the armistice at 11am on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918.

The leaders of the combatants came together on a train. The poor corporal given the job of typing up the armistice document got himself muddled and typed the first page twice. Realising his mistake he went AWOL and ran off into the surrounding forest. But it didn't matter, they all signed it anyway.

I count myself in the lucky generation. I have not known the horrors of war first hand or even at school when they had cadet training. Dad was a pacifist so while the other boys were getting training in how to fire bren guns, howitzers and hand grenades, I was sitting in the library with the Quakers.

But why remember? Wouldn't it be better if we just forgot all the horrors of war? There are lots of answers to this question and I want to offer just a few.

We need to remember because remembering is healing. Many of those returning from war didn't want to remember. It was just too painful or they were protecting those on the homefront. Many never really adjusted to home life. My grandma, typical of the war generations, had the saying "Least said, soonest mended." Now of course we know the reverse is true. Even if it's hard and we shed a tear or two, healing can be found in remembering and retelling.

In the aftermath of the civil war in Rwanda in the early 1990's a psychologist was asked to go to one of the refugee camps and try and help the women of the camp. Although safe from slaughter, the women of the camp weren't sleeping. They had witnessed the most terrible suffering so in order to protect them the camp authorities had told them not to speak to anyone of them.

The psychologist set up a safe place for the people to tell their stories. It was story tree just outside the village. Every morning she would go out and sit under the tree. The first day no one came. The second day one woman appeared and then hurried away. The next day a couple of woman showed up. Within a week scores of women were coming and telling their tales of loss, and fear, and death. Finally, after weeks of listening, she knew the story tree was working as reports confirmed that the women of the camp were now sleeping.

All kiwi families to this day are affected by war. It might be the great aunty that could never share her true feelings. It might be the grandpa who never came home. These scars are carried by the next generations too.

So we gather to remember because its healing.

We gather to remember because the courage of others gives us courage.

In an oft quoted piece of Scripture used today in our Gospel we hear the line, “No greater love can we have than to lay down our lives for our friends.” It is used to refer to the soldiers of our wars, however in its original context it refers to Jesus and his death on the cross through which we find the hope of resurrected life. But many in the wars did lay down their lives for others and in that action we do see what love looks like.

In the First World War, Jack was sitting in the trenches and he could hear his mate crying out to him. “Help me, help me. He was crying.” The problem was he was dying in no man's land. So Jack went to commanding officer to ask permission to go and rescue his friend. Permission was denied.

But Jack went anyway. He waited till nightfall and went up over the top of the trench. When he arrived at his mates side he picked him up, put him over his shoulders and carried him back to the trenches. Unfortunately a sniper was also awake and wounded Jack.

On arriving back the officer was furious seeing both men were mortally wounded. “Now I have lost both of you, but tell me,” he said to Jack, “was it worth it?” “Yes,” he said, “because when I arrived Bill said ‘Thank you, I knew you would come.’”

There are many stories of solidarity and mateship and among them the story of the chaplains needs to be told. Over 6,000 chaplains went to war in the two world wars. They went to give comfort and encouragement, to offer the hope of resurrection and the assurance of prayers. Many died themselves. Unable to take up arms they were a sitting target. Some of you might remember Hoppy Hopkins. When he was imprisoned and unable to find any vestments he used the jacket of a dead Greek general. Bishop Manu Bennett served in Vietnam as well as World War 2. He told me he held a communion service on the first day of arriving with the troops. One other man came. A week passed in the bush fighting the enemy. The next Sunday, he said, every man was present with bells on.

We remember because remembering gives us courage.

Lastly, we remember because it makes us better people.

It is healing to remember, it shows us what love is like and it gives us courage, but it also poses us a question. If the people that have gone before me gave up so much, how can I live better? We ask ourselves, “Is the life I’ m living worth someone else dying for? Am I living my best life with noble goals, or am I just cruising along? Do I really value my country and our democracy and low levels of corruption? Do I enjoy the life that others have given me, am I living up to their legacy?”

We remember because remembering is healing, it gives us courage and as we remember it makes us strive to be a better community.