

Year A
Wisdom 3:1-9

Remembrance Sunday
Ps. 116:1-8
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Nov. 8, 2020
John 6:37-40

On Wednesday November 11th at the annual Remembrance Day service in this community and communities across this nation and around the world, we will share the traditional military act of Remembrance: gathering at the community cenotaph, the sounding of the Last Post; 2 minutes of silence; then Reveille and a collective promise to hold in our memory the people who are so much more than names inscribed on stone monuments scattered around the world. I, like you, have done this every November 11th since childhood.

When I stepped into the role of Chaplain to Legion Branch 300 in Norwood, I asked myself, for the first time ever, I think, why we do what we do on this day? I did some research and learned some things that are well worth sharing. You know most of this but I would like to remind you today of the value of the symbolism we take for granted or are not even aware as we stand together on November 11th each year.

The Last Post had its beginnings somewhere in the 17th century in British Army camps. It was a standard practice to inspect all sentry posts set up on the perimeter of an encampment. Sounding a bugle marked the satisfactory completion of the inspection at each post. The last post was, naturally enough, the last point to be inspected. The bugle call signaling that this particular inspection had been completed marked the end of the military day. During the 19th century, the Last Post was carried by the British military to the various countries of the British Empire. In all of the countries of the Empire, the Last Post was incorporated into military funerals and memorial services, where it offers a final farewell, symbolizing that the duties of the dead are now fulfilled and that they may rest in peace.

Reveille can be traced back to the 1600's as a way of rousing or waking a sleeping army. As you know, it is now also a part of military funerals and memorials. Reveille is always played upon completion of the period of silence after the Last Post has sounded. It is understood as a call to the dead soldier's spirit to rise and prepare for the glory of the day that is to come.

The switch thoughts for a moment, consider another prominent symbol of Remembrance Day – the poppy, immortalized in John McCrae's *In Flanders Fields*. The poem has been declared "an exact description" of a gentle wind blowing from the east and making the wild poppies sway amid all the horror of the battle field.

The poem was published and widely circulated, the poppy took on a particular poetic symbolism of its own:

The red petals symbolized the colour of the blood soaking the battle fields;
The yellow and black centre symbolized the mud and the desolation;

The green of the stem represented the forests and fields where soldiers died;
The stem itself stood straight and unyielding like the courage of a soldier.

That is, perhaps, a little romantic. However, there is a little known fact about the poppy that does, in fact, make it an eloquent symbol of hope. Scarlet poppies grow naturally in conditions of disturbed earth throughout Western Europe. The destruction brought by the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century transformed bare land into fields of blood red poppies growing around the graves of fallen soldiers.

In 1914, the fields of northern France and Flanders were once again ripped apart by war. When fighting finally ceased in 1918, the mud of the battlefields was allowed to rest and nature began to restore itself. Before long the wild flowers grew and bloomed. Once again, the poppy became the symbol of sacrifice.

With surprising frequency the day of Remembrance in our churches and the Feast of All Saints, which you celebrated here last Sunday morning, converge. In the midst of the violent imagery of war and the grand visions for peace, the Church, both last Sunday with the Feast of All Saints and today on Remembrance Sunday offers words of hope that after all is said and done, after war and natural disasters and, especially this year, in the midst of Covid 19, the enduring truth of the Beatitudes and today's words from Jesus that God's Son is in the world as God's gift of peace and justice and, hope in the midst of all the struggle that seems to have us putting one foot cautiously in front of the other just to get through each day some times.

Today we gather to celebrate and sanctify the memories of men and women who went to war. In a different kind of way the people we honour now also worked toward a vision of God's kingdom, not one of warfare as we might suppose but one equally as relevant to the needs of this world right now. They give us the vision of a kingdom of self-sacrifice, one in which persecution and injustice cannot be tolerated for anyone. In struggling against evil, those who stood up to evil sought to restore hope to so many who were experiencing the world as a dark place.

The liturgies of the past several weeks urge us all to work for the peace of the whole world, for a place where the shema (Love the Lord your God with all your heart; with all your soul; with all your mind and with all your strength and love your neighbour as yourself) allows no exceptions to God's compassion and love. Remembrance Day and this Remembrance service carry a prayer that one day there will be no need for its existence. Those we honour today stepped up when power was abused. They had a vision for what ought to be in the world God created for all of us. Over time, the poppy became a symbol of sacrifice. In the Christian Church we have another symbol: the cross of Christ. Jesus understood sacrifice. "Greater love has no one than this, that they lay down their life for a friend." and that is what Christ did for us. This day two symbols of sacrifice, the poppy and the cross, are entwined in God's kingdom. May we carry both within us every day of every year.