

In at least two instances this has been done in France. The war memorial at Gentioux-Pigerolles depicts an orphan in bronze pointing to an inscription 'Maudite soit la guerre' (Cursed be war). In Équeurdreville-Hainneville the statue is of a grieving widow with two small children.

But let us, for a moment, go back to those soldiers who died in World War 1. They died because Europe was bitterly divided. The origins of both World Wars lay in bitter rivalries in our own continent. Those who died in those two wars did so because Europe could not get its act together. If it is possible to say that good came out of WW2, then we can point to the determination of European nations not to go to war with each other again. The European Union was the fruit of that. Note I am saying that the European Union was the result of that determination to keep the peace: it was not the cause. Political unions come and go and it may well be that in fifty years all twenty-seven nations will have left. From a Christian perspective that is neither here nor there.

But what is very definitely here and there is the desire to live in peace, militarily, economically and politically. Reconciliation is a God given duty because without it millions of innocent people will suffer. Let me give the last word to the most famous veteran of WW1. When Harry Patch died in 2009 at the age of 111 he was the oldest man in Europe and the last survivor of WW1. In 2004 (Wikipedia/Sunday Times) he wrote:

When the war ended, I don't know if I was more relieved that we'd won or that I didn't have to go back. Passchendaele was a disastrous battle—thousands and thousands of young lives were lost. It makes me angry. Earlier this year, I went back to Ypres to shake the hand of Charles Kuentz, Germany's only surviving veteran from the war. It was emotional. He is 107. We've had 87 years to think what war is. To me, it's a licence to go out and murder. Why should the British government call me up and take me out to a battlefield to shoot a man I never knew, whose language I couldn't speak? All those lives lost for a war finished over a table. Now what is the sense in that?

In accordance with Patch's instructions, no guns were allowed at his funeral and even the officiating soldiers did not have their ceremonial weapons.

WE will remember them.

N Clews 11th November 2018

## Remembrance Sunday 2018

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them

I think the author of that poem, Laurence Binyon, was very clear about who he was remembering. He was writing just six weeks into World War One when the casualty rate was already very great. By the time that last line became incorporated into the annual Remembrance Day service the unprecedented scale of death was utterly shocking. Every family will have lost a son in war; even the tiniest village will have lost some of its finest young men. To make every attempt to remember them was a natural emotional reaction. It would not have been appropriate to ask why. Some things don't need an explanation.

That was the case in 1918. It is not the case in 2018. We are no longer emotionally attached to the young men who died in World War One. No one alive now can remember that war nor those who died in it. The personal connection is no longer there.

### So who are we remembering? And why?

With regard to who we are remembering, it is quite explicitly military personnel who have died in two world wars. The reason is perhaps a very practical one: we have a record of their names inscribed on war memorials all over the country. War memorials before that time are virtually unknown. I think it is assumed that we add those who have died since World War 2 which will include people we know personally.

But soldiers died in war before the Great War. In the 1870s Britain fought a war in South Africa against the Zulus in order to establish a new political order. In the mid C19th Britain fought two wars against China in order to protect the drugs trade, to ensure that opium could be smuggled into China creating thousands of drug addicts. Do we wish to remember them?

Perhaps in order to answer that question we need to ask why we are remembering them at all. I guess a possible answer is inscribed on every war memorial: they fought for God, King and Country. This is a very serious

claim. It is a very controversial claim. Was it in God's name that the Zulu kingdom was destroyed in the late C19th? Did God support the drugs trade in C19th China?

In the Civil War of the C17th both sides were very consciously fighting for God and Country – only one side was for King Charles and the other, according to their own propaganda, for parliament and King Jesus. So whose side was God on? History might say that of Parliament because that side achieved military victory and, even though the monarchy returned, it was at Parliament's invitation and on Parliament's terms. So do we give thanks for Cromwell's New Model Army? Do we ignore those soldiers loyal to the king? And is the winning side necessarily God's side?

These are very difficult examples. But in reality the difficulties are just as real in the two great wars of the twentieth century. There is no doubt that the Kaiser's Germany was an aggressive militaristic nation. But from the perspective of an ordinary German citizen, the German empire was simply trying to get a share of what Britain and France had already gobbled up in Africa and Asia. Germany wanted 'a place in the sun'. And Germany used the means which Britain and France had already used for their own ends: war. Germans soldiers were fighting for God, King and Country, just like ours. So should we give thanks for the Germans soldiers as well? Should we give thanks for the millions of men on both sides who killed each other? Or should we ask the Germans to recognize that they were the aggressors and ask them to give thanks for the British soldiers who killed theirs?

**Attempting to answer this question is a nightmare if we think that remembering is about gratitude!**

So perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Perhaps the question is not for whom we should give thanks but for whom we should ask forgiveness and of whom we should ask forgiveness. Because then there is no dilemma. We ask forgiveness for all those who in war have borne arms or have taken actions which have killed others. In asking forgiveness for them we include the soldiers of all sides; more significantly we include politicians of all sides for it is not soldiers who decide to go to war; more significantly still we ask forgiveness for ourselves for it is in our names that politicians declare war. Politicians go to war, whether against Imperial Germany or Sadaam Hussein's Iraq because they think that in the long run we will thank them for it. They believe it is what we want. And somehow we, I, must have given

them reason to think that.

But we ask forgiveness not only for our soldiers but ask forgiveness of them. For we have subjected them to war. Perhaps the greatest harm we have done them is not that they have been killed or physically injured but that they have been mentally and morally injured – we have asked them to kill on our behalf.

This came home to me a few weeks ago when I heard a radio discussion about the effects of drone warfare on military personnel. A soldier piloting a drone is in no physical danger – she is many miles from the combat area. But she sees the effects of her decision. And this particular discussion was quite specifically about women soldiers – it was about the effect of piloting a drone on a pregnant soldier. The woman carrying new life in her womb sees very clearly on her computer screen the death that she is causing as she presses the button on her computer keyboard. With one part of her body she nurtures new life; with another part she takes it away. We often talk of military personnel sacrificing their lives. Indeed they may do so, but the real success is when they take life. That is what they are trained to do.

If we need to ask forgiveness of our soldiers, we also need to ask forgiveness of those whom they harm. The Battle of Towton, fought in 1461 just a few miles away, saw appalling numbers of deaths. But there was a kind of fairness about it: it was one armed man against another and the victor was the one who was the stronger or the most skilful. WW1 was probably the last war in which military deaths outnumbered civilian: 10 million military and 7 million civilians. In WW2 the respective numbers were about 15 m to 20 m. In the war in Afghanistan the number of deaths amongst British and American forces were around 2700. The number of civilians death is estimated by the Guardian at 20000 – seven times more. In this country our soldiers are greeted as heroes; we are urged to wear our poppies with pride. But the real cost of war is not paid by soldiers. It is paid by civilians, by unarmed women and children. How can a loving God not be angry at this? How can a loving God not be angry at me? For it is done in my name. We need to ask forgiveness of all those unarmed victims of war. These are those of whom we should say, 'We will remember them.'