

FOCUS ON FAITH

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REMEMBERING AGAIN

11am on 11/11/11 – as a time and date it has all the symmetry but of course the significance extends well beyond the numbers.

In an era in which there are no living survivors of the so-called “Great War” thankfully we are brought back each Armistice Day to pause, remember and express our gratitude for those who made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf as well as those who suffered physical and psychological wounds. The poppies we wear remind us of the fields of crimson in Flanders where so much blood was spilled but where delicate ruby red flowers appeared symbolising new life rising from apparent disaster.

2011 is the 90th anniversary of the Royal British Legion, the custodians of Remembrance, whose members work tirelessly to support those impacted by the horror of armed conflict – not just in the past but here and now in our day and age. They also deserve our gratitude as they ensure we don’t forget or in any way take for granted the freedom we are able to enjoy in this country.

When I think about both the World Wars it reminds me of how tenuous our lives are. The thread of life we have in the tapestry of history seems very fragile to me.

Both my grandfathers were involved in the First World War and both were injured in battle. My maternal grandfather was shot through the wrist by a sniper just outside the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem. My parents have visited the site where it probably happened.

My paternal grandfather was seriously injured in the leg by so-called “friendly fire”. His unit in France was ordered “over the top” before the end of an artillery barrage by our own troops and he was hit. If it hadn’t been for the bravery of a soldier from New Zealand he possibly would have died there but he was brought back to safety and repatriated back to the UK. He was only 18 years old and had volunteered to go the front before he was due to be called up, having probably been a little economical with the truth about his age.

I never heard either of them talk about their experiences – men of that era didn’t – and they both lived the remainder of their lives with the physical reminders; one with a wrist that couldn’t function properly and the other with a limp from a knee that had been shattered beyond repair and which he was unable to bend.

But much as I regret the pain my grandfathers went through, I am extremely grateful that they were merely injured. You see had they been killed, neither I nor my parents would ever have been born. My grandfathers came back, were married and had families and I’m a direct descendant – that’s how fragile life is. Other families of course weren’t so fortunate – their loved ones didn’t return and their lives were impoverished as a result.

That’s why it is vital to take time out and specifically reflect on both Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday. It is fitting that we honour the heroism and the self-sacrifice that still goes on today with our brave Forces personnel fighting far from home and those involved in counter-terrorism operations here in UK and abroad. I will continue to wear my poppy with pride in respect and with admiration and gratitude as I remember those lost or injured in combat.

However as a Christian I believe that there is more than what we experience here on earth in our short lifetimes. There is an eternal perspective that we need to take into consideration. The Bible tells us that “**we reap what we sow**” and our actions and reactions; our words and deeds are seeds which once planted come back to us as harvests for good or harm.

Jesus told us to “**love and pray for our enemies**” (Matthew 5:44) and He of course paid the ultimate price with His death on the Cross to re-establish peace for mankind with a loving just God. And St. Paul wrote, “**Do your best to live in peace with everyone**” (Romans 12:18). Perhaps if we followed this advice our world would be a better place – in our personal relationships, family and work lives and in national and international spheres.

None of us knows when our thread of life will end so this week as I remember and give thanks I’ll also be praying that I will have the wisdom to learn from the lessons of history and apply the principles of peace, reconciliation and forgiveness in my relationships with other people, whoever they may be – friend or perceived foe.

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