

Remembrance 2017

*(This opening dialogue was more for the benefit of the cubs, scouts and young people who gathered with us at the Remembrance service. I can advise that the congregation were impressive with their times tables and new their dates also!!)*

Learning to remember.

As we are learning – we have to find ways of remembering what we learn – whether it's by lots of practice or in other ways.

When I was at school we practised Times Tables on a Friday (after swimming) and our teacher Mr Hayward made us stand round the classroom walls and we could only sit down when we answered correctly. (I'm surprised I'm not still standing there)

I made sure I knew my tables and sure enough it does stay with you.

Let's test the (older) people and see if they remember.

I was okay at Maths and times tables but not so good at History and the names and dates of kings and Queens and all that.

Let's see who knows what happened on these dates.

1066? – battle of Hastings – William the Conqueror (Earlier that year there had been the battle of Stamford Bridge which involved Chelsea against Arsenal I think)

1533? – bearing in mind we are in a Church of England and not a Catholic church, can anyone guess??

King Henry VIII severs ties with the Catholic church.

1588?? Spanish Armada was destroyed.

(To the cubs and scouts)

On 5<sup>th</sup> November we remember an event from 1605?? – Gunpowder plot.

What was edited and finalised in 1662?  
The Book of Common prayer.

We learn what happened and we learn when it happened and we can choose to try and remember if we wish.

Sometimes we tie two dates together – who knows why 1973 and 2016 are two dates we tie together?  
We joined and are leaving the European Union.

There are two sets of dates you will hear again and again.

1914 to 1918 and 1939 to 1945 and they are??

World War 1 and World War 2.

And we choose to remember. Many people will buy a poppy to wear and to show their support for the Royal British Legion appeal that cares for the injured servicemen and women and the families of the bereaved.

We learn that on both sides of conflict are ordinary people like us, from villages and towns and cities who are caught up in these monumental struggles and so very many never come home.

We choose to remember and we give thanks for their lives – because we live in peace and freedom because of their sacrifice.

This poem is one reason why we wear the poppy...

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.

(This talk was accompanied by a variety of photographs)

Readings. Isaiah 65:17-25 and Revelation 21:1-4

The two readings we have, written hundreds and hundreds of years apart, are speaking of the same thing.

They are a vision of what things will be like when God orders all things and His Kingdom comes fully into being.

Peace and freedom, abundance and generosity, no more mourning and crying and pain – no one injured from fighting in wars and no lives lost either. That is what God's kingdom will be like. But it's not like that yet.

During my lifetime I'm glad to say that it has become acceptable for injured servicemen and women to show their disability. I used to shop from time to time at a Sainsbury's near my house and on a Saturday would often see a former serviceman who had lost the bottom half of one leg and had a modern metal prosthetic leg. He wore long shorts to his knees and had one good leg and one good prosthetic leg – and I used to think YES!! Quite right, that's what it cost you to be in the army and we should know that and respect you for how things are for you.

I think the Paralympics and Prince Harry's Invictus Games have helped us face more honestly the physical cost to servicemen and women.

You young people will find it quite normal to see someone running using blades, or walking with a prosthetic limb – but when I was younger, all that was hidden away either under clothes or disabled veterans simply kept themselves less visible.

Walking around the streets of the town I lived, meeting people at church or on business – there was no way of guessing whether or not they had been involved in the war – but I have been fortunate to meet some ordinary

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people who were caught up in the war and very simply and calmly told me about their extra - ordinary experiences.

I met a man called Mr Hunter – he was a customer of the building society I worked for and when I arrived at his house he was in his extended garage working on a very old Ford lorry that he was restoring.

I had to help him sort out some building society accounts and we went inside to his front room and we had a cup of tea. There on his mantelpiece was a picture of a very young Mr Hunter in an army unit and a sort of certificate. He told me he had been mentioned in dispatches.

I asked him about what he did in the war – and he said he drove huge big lorries.

Well that didn't sound too exciting, until he told me more. He told me that the biggest heavy tanks were too slow to travel long distances quickly so they used to be loaded on transporters and taken near to where they where wanted.

His unit had to drive the tanks near to the river Rhine in Germany, where units of the army were trying to build pontoon bridges over the river (a pontoon bridge is like a roadway that sits on top of floating supports). The only problem with the bridge really, was that the enemy had snipers firing at them from the far side.

A bridge had been put across and Mr Hunter was told to take his lorry with the tank on the back, across the river and to drive ahead to a village where he was to rendezvous with a parachute regiment. His lorry had special armour plating on that's special metal to stop

bullets getting through. He told me he remembers two things about it.

1. The sound of bullets pinging of the armour plating as he was shot at and 2. the fact that the bridge sank below the water as he drove onto it. He actually drove across half under water.

He was mentioned in despatches for extra-ordinary bravery as one of the first men to cross the Rhine. He drove ahead to the village he was to get to and there by the road and in the trees were men of the parachute regiment who had been killed as they came down from their aircraft.

Just an ordinary man; who lived through extraordinary times, spending his retirement restoring an old Ford lorry who could tell me quite calmly about what he went through, but it was as vivid for him as if it had been the day before.

When I was curate in Church Stretton (Shropshire) I went to visit a man called Gordon Skinner. Gordon was a retired bank manager and he used his skills in retirement to head up the committee responsible for building the parish centre which was over the road from the church. We chatted all about that, partly because they had just put up a new wall to create a study for me. Our conversation went this way and that and he too had photographs of his time in the war.

[Picture] This is Gordon and his two brothers. They only saw each other for one ½ of one day in 5 whole years.

Gordon was married to Joyce and I asked about that. They had already started their relationship, but he only saw her

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for two weeks out of 3 and ½ years. They married after the war was over.

In the war he was trained as a cipher operator, so his job was to send and receive messages in code...his unit went all over the place, in Europe and elsewhere.

I asked him whether or not he thought about what was going on, the fight against evil and oppression, the need to have freedom, to set others free, but he said no not really, he just did his job, he wanted it all to end and he wanted to go home.

He had to work with his radio truck in some strange places and one time was next to a golf course in Southern France. It was Sunday Morning and the Padre (that's the army Vicar) was holding a communion service. Gordon went along, but he said it wasn't easy as in the background the guns were firing all the time – the really big ones – crump crump crump.

He could tell me about it really quite calmly, but it seemed to me it was as vivid to him as if it had been the day before...he had not forgotten.

It can sound kind of exciting but neither man told me their stories in a way that made it sound adventurous. They just wanted to do what they had to do and come home. Some men and women, like a friend called Bill, suffered such dreadful things that he never spoke about it. He was in a Japanese prisoner of war camp.

It's hearing these stories and meeting ordinary people that bring home how costly the wars have been and how valuable our freedom and peace is. I wish we only had to remember the two world wars, but across the nation

families are grieving for young men and women killed and injured in recent conflicts. Why can't we live in peace and freedom? The sort of peace described in those two bible readings?

People living in their own homes, planting crops they enjoy themselves, anyone who doesn't reach 100 years old will be thought strange.

Although the world does not live at peace and God's kingdom isn't yet established as it one day will be, we do have freedom and we have a choice how we use it.

In one of my communion prayers that I use here at church, it says this.

*Lord of all life;  
Help us to work together for that day  
When your kingdom comes and justice and mercy will be  
seen in all the earth.*

Help us to work together.

What is it you can do, to make God's Kingdom a reality where you live, go to school, work, chill out?

I was telling you earlier about Gordon Skinner, his radio truck and being a cipher operator. In 1945 he and his unit was on the Island of Malta.

Gordon was on duty when a message came through...he worked out the code and was the first man to discover on Malta that the war was over.

What do you think he did with that message??

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Do you think he kept it to himself? No way it went straight to his commanding officer and then he communicated the news far and wide, Good News, the war is over.

We have good news to share. Our good news is a story about someone who is described as very ordinary, and yet did something extra-ordinary. He gave his life on a cross and then just when everyone thought their hopes and dreams of God's kingdom were over, his resurrection surprised everyone.

Jesus Christ is our Good News. Jesus Christ is the one we speak of and worship for through him God's glorious Kingdom has been seen and is still seen today.

It's not fully established there are countries at peace and many still at war, but we work together for the day when justice and mercy are seen in all the earth.

In the same way that I believe injured servicemen and woman should have no shame whatsoever if they are injured or disabled, Christians should have no shame at sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

So here is this week's challenge. Tell someone about either your faith, being a Christian, or that you go to church or went to church. See if this week you can slip into a conversation something like that. Become one of the ones who spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

After a brief introduction we sang the hymn – 'We have a gospel to proclaim'.