

REMEMBRANCE 2018

Today we mark a very significant moment in history: the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month - the precise time when the Armistice ending World War I was signed 100 years ago. This event ushered in great hopes for a new age of peace. It marked the end of what was said to have been “the war to end all wars”, and Prime Minister Lloyd-George’s stated aim was to build “a land fit for heroes”.

The reality was to prove very different. Poverty and exploitation continued, leading to the General Strike in 1926. Speculation became intense, causing the world economy to take a nose dive following the Wall Street Crash in 1929. Mass unemployment ensued, plunging the world into crisis and paving the way for totalitarian leaders to seize power. Naturally enough, the veterans who had sacrificed so much and been promised so much, felt betrayed.

Reflecting on this betrayal, an important question remains in the offing. What care is in place for veterans of war - and likewise the myriad civilians traumatised by the effects of war - when the guns have stopped firing and the time comes to attempt the re-building of shattered lives? It is too late now to put things right for those who suffered through and as a result of the carnage of World War I. They are long gone. But the question nonetheless remains of how best we might honour the memory of those who fought and died; those who were maimed, injured and psychologically scarred, often for the rest of their lives? What kind of future would they have wished for their children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and all succeeding generations?

These are questions that indeed we might put to ourselves, given the fact that their initial hope was so sadly betrayed: the hope that they had fought a war to end all wars. As has often been observed, there has scarcely been a single year since the signing of the Armistice in 1918 when this country has not been at war somewhere in the world. This is hardly a record that the 1914-18 veterans would commend, for the ideals of those who have suffered the tragedy and horror of war first hand, the ideals they would cherish, are those of peace. These are the aspirations we have a duty to call to mind and pursue if we wish truly to honour the sacrifice of those who have fought and died in wars not of their own making.

Such ideals were given clear articulation following the Second World War in the context of the initial meetings of newly formed United Nations, and in particular, in the vision expressed by a group of Commonwealth ministers working together in an informal way at the San Francisco Conference of 1946. The following aspirations were formulated: ideals which all people of peace and good will may readily identify with.

- To save future generations from the scourge of war, which brings untold sorrow to humankind.
- To reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, the worth of the human person, and equal rights for men and women, and nations large and small.
- To establish conditions in which justice and international law can be maintained.
- To promote social progress and better standards of life.
- To practise tolerance and live in peace with one’s neighbours.
- To unite in strength to promote international peace and security.
- To ensure that armed force is only used to promote the common interest.

These aspirations remain valid, deeply meaningful and worthwhile, and they were undergirded by three powerful principles:

1. To remember what has been suffered and move beyond such suffering.
2. That nations and individuals should constantly re-dedicate themselves to collective responsibility.
3. That all people should genuinely seek the reconciliation of nations and individuals, more especially given the increasingly evident reality that we live in a global 'village'.

Glorious principles indeed, to which, we might imagine, the millions who have suffered and fallen in so many wars would chorus a deafening "Amen"! If any should doubt that such ideals need our earnest support given the cruel losses inflicted by war, they might call to mind some words from a poem written by Rudyard Kipling for his beloved son, Jack. Kipling nurses the vain hope that one day, Jack, who fell in his first day of action at the Battle of the Somme, might, by some miracle, one day return across the English Channel.

'Have you news of my boy Jack?'

Not this tide.

'When d'you think that he'll come back?'

Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.

'Has any one had word of him?'

Not this tide.

For what is sunk will hardly swim,

Not with this wind blowing, and this tide..

'Oh dear, what comfort can I find?'

None this tide

Nor any tide

Except he did not shame his kind -

Not even with that wind blowing and that tide.

Kipling's loss was that of so many families, then and now. The best way, perhaps, to redeem such loss and sacrifice, is to take heart from the inspiring vision framed in the United Nations Charter, over 70 years ago. It remains our ongoing task, and that of future generations, to strive to make that generous-spirited and peaceful vision more of reality.

(Revd Ian Welch, Mottingham Village, 11.11.2018).