

Parish of Mottingham St Andrew with St Alban

Remembrance Sunday

My late grandfather, who died back in 1981, had the great misfortune to see active service in both World Wars, having served as a boy seaman at the Battle of Jutland in WW1, and then in the Mediterranean fleet as a radar officer from 1939-1945, during which time he rarely had the opportunity to return home for shore leave. Grandad (or Ted, as his friends and comrades knew him), had a sceptical view of Remembrance Day. He contended that those who had been in action would much rather, as far as possible, *forget*. His only comment on the Battle of Jutland was, that if you are standing next to your best friend when he is blown to bits (which was his experience on the gunnery deck), then you don't want to remember such events or talk about them. And after that one laconic statement, he never did. He was also somewhat sceptical about the idea of being a hero, and contended, with a wry grimace, that "there are no atheists in the front line".

The great Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, who also had the misfortune to be born into the "lost generation" - Lewis lost many friends in the conflagration - used to darkly jest that Flanders would have been much better if you had known in advance that you were going to survive. Lewis only did so by virtue first of contracting trench fever in 1917, and then by being wounded by a stray shell before the savagery of the German 'final push' in 1918. Even though Lewis was quite prepared to wax eloquent about the Medieval war poem, the *Chanson de Roland*, he remained, for the main part, silent on the subject of Flanders fields.

These reactions of some of those who "went through it" might give us pause. Almost certainly their hopes for succeeding generations would be that they *shouldn't* have to go through it. Certainly their experiences gave the lie to the ancient Roman maxim: *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* - (how sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country). There was nothing sweet, fitting or glorious about Jutland, Flanders, D-Day, or indeed about the more recent 'theatres' of war. Most often it seems that those who suffer the chaos of battle are prompted by a grim adherence to duty and a fervent prayer to survive.

Mindful of these realities, many people of faith stand appalled at the cruel and tragic waste of life that war entails. It is also quite proper to give great thanks for those who sacrificed their lives in the cause of freedom in WW2. There is, however, the thought that often the moral case for war is not so strong as it was in 1939. So often, it seems, war is used as an extension of statecraft to serve perceived national interests. Moral discernments are much more challenging in such cases, and the Christian call is surely to pray for peace and reconciliation? As these prayers are offered one remembers also that those who died, did so in the cause of peace, and that the best way, therefore, one can honour their legacy is by striving unreservedly to achieve that great goal.

With every blessing,

Revd Ian Welch

Rector, Mottingham St Andrew with St Alban