

Remembrance Sunday 2021 – Rev'd Canon Roy Woodhams

Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, an officer in the 2nd Battery, 1st Brigade Canadian Field Artillery, died on the morning of Sunday 2nd May 1915. He had left his dugout and was killed instantly by a direct hit from an 8 inch German shell. What body parts could be found were later gathered into sandbags and laid in an army blanket for burial that evening. Alexis was 22 years old and a popular young officer. Before the outbreak of the war, he had graduated from McGill University with a degree in Civil Engineering.

There wasn't a Chaplain available to conduct the burial service, so his friend and commanding officer, who was both a Major and a qualified Doctor, John McCrae, agreed to conduct the service. Later that evening, moved by the events of the day, McCrae began to pen the lines of a poem – it began:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row*

From early history, flowers have become symbols; the Clover leaf for the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Lilies for purity, Roses for love and for England, Daffodils for the Marie Curie Cancer charity and for Wales, Thistles for Scotland and the Shamrock for Ireland. But, how the poppy was chosen as the universal symbol of Remembrance has a lot to do with that sad death, on an early summer evening in 1915, and the poem that ensued:

John McCrae, himself, was said to be unhappy with the poem and he threw it aside, but one of his fellow officers found it and was so touched by it that he sent the poem to England where it was published in the magazine Punch. And as a result, the scarlet poppy quickly became the symbol for soldiers who died in battle.

A hundred years ago, In 1921, the British Legion was formed, and began the Poppy Day Appeal to raise money for poor and disabled veterans, and now the Poppy campaign for The Earl Haigh Fund is one of the Royal British Legion's most important activities.

The appeal continues to raise the funding needed to help servicemen and women and their families in the most practical ways. And, critically, the appeal serves to maintain our awareness of our past, and present, in order that our prayers for peace, and the future of our families, our children and grandchildren, will be fulfilled.

The bible records much violence, many wars and countless deaths, especially in the Old Testament, and it is a heartbreaking reflection that there has probably never been a time when conflict has not existed somewhere in the world. The book of the prophet Micah, from which we heard this morning, prophesied a future of hope. An ideal world, where nations come together in peace instead of war. The writer's vision saw a time when the arms of war would be turned into farming tools and people would live in peaceful community.

And the cry was taken up again when God sent Jesus Christ, who taught peace to the disciples and anyone who would hear him, and who said, as recorded in the Gospel Reading, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.*"!

But the religious leaders of the day didn't like what he had to say, so they killed him! Jesus Christ, the light of the world, died for us in an act of darkest violence. But our Christian faith is based on the belief, as proved in history, that three days later, as the Son of God, he came back to life. And because of that event, we are a people who are still able to live in hope – the hope that death is not an ending, but the beginning of new future in that place we call Heaven!

So, regardless of the obstacles, peace must be what we all strive and hope for – what Micah foresaw, and what Jesus taught. But the driving

force for peace must come from us, it must come from our remembrance of those who have given their lives in war; it must come from those injured in conflict.

The poppy wreaths laid at the Village War Memorial today, remember not only those from this community who have given their lives, but also the injured and their families for whom we have no recorded names.

So let us remember, through the pain and loss, that there is always the light of hope, love and faith through Jesus Christ. Meanwhile, we still have the Poppy as our symbol of Remembrance!

*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 among 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.*