

Remembrance Day – War Memorial

In every village, in every town, there are war memorials such as this one. Some are large, some very small. Some list name after name of those who died, often many from the same family; others, where any list would simply be too long, have a simpler inscription. This memorial, erected in 1919, was an important focus for the relatives of those who never returned from the trenches and carnage of the First World War. Wimbledon Village, bustling now with people of all ages, was in 1919 a place where parents mourned their sons, and widows wondered how they would care for their children, and those who survived the Somme or Ypres grieved for those who had fought alongside them. Here, at the memorial, all those who mourned were united, determined to honour those they loved, determined not to let all that loss and pain be for nothing, determined to build a better future.

And there is a second inscription here too, added after the Second World War, when some of those who were born during the First World War, who had grown up either without a father or with a father broken by the experience of war, lost their lives in fighting for their country, shot down in their Spitfire, caught in the carnage of Dunkirk, dying from exhaustion as a prisoner of war building railways in the jungles of Asia. And others returned home to find that their parents or wives or children had been killed in bombing raids.

So few words on this memorial to stand for so much pain and loss.

As time passes, there are fewer and fewer people who still grieve personally for those lost in the world wars of the last Century. Fewer people who will come and stand here and think of particular comrades or relatives. Children will play on the steps, people will sit on the benches and eat their sandwiches; in time, will this become just another interesting landmark? A strange relic of the past?

This will be true only if we cease to care about the cost of war and the price of peace.

Since 1945, many men and women in the armed forces have lost their lives in conflict, most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq. Their deaths have been felt deeply by their fellow servicemen and women and most of all by their families, but few of us have had to bear the cost of these far-away wars. We have delegated that to our armed forces, so that we can get on with our lives undisturbed.

This memorial stands to remind us that all of us are involved, we cannot simply abdicate responsibility. All of us have a debt to those who give their lives, we have a duty to honour them and remember.

Memorial and ritual are essential in this process of remembering. Faith could not be passed from generation to generation without it. The story of Moses leading the people out of slavery is re-told in Jewish homes every Passover. How do you value freedom if you forget what it is to be in slavery? It is an essential formative event. The memorial does not just describe the past but shapes the values of the future. Jesus's last meal with his friends is re-enacted by Christians at every communion service, commemorating his offering, his life, his love, his death. The Cross, a symbol of torture under the Roman occupying forces, has become a memorial, a way of remembering the cost of God's love and a reminder of how we can follow in that path and be bearers of God's love.

Memorials, whether they are ritual acts or physical objects, take on a meaning far wider than the actions or the physical structure. They are symbolic of those things which give life its value, those things which underpin our civilisation: Honour, integrity, decency, justice, generosity, self-sacrifice, freedom, love.

War can only be justified if it has been to defend those principles and to oppose oppression and tyranny.

Yet those very same principles can be so easily eroded. Trust, the idea that 'my word is my bond', has become scarce in the world of business; respect has been replaced by fame as an ideal. The question is so often not 'what is right' but 'what is legal'. The loss of these principals costs society dear.

In war, people die – that is a very terrible cost, one of which we need to be constantly aware.

When we abdicate responsibility, we do not eliminate the cost. When we allow others to fight on our behalf without any sense of involvement, when we insulate ourselves from the obvious costs of war, from the human pain and the human grief, from the wounding and the death, then what we lose are those shared values and civilisation itself begins to die.

Look on this memorial and remember. It is there not just to commemorate those who died in the first and second world wars, but to unite us, to act as an ever-present reminder (as we pass by) of our collective responsibility.

We owe a debt to all those who have died in fighting oppression and tyranny. We can only repay that debt by the way in which we work to make this society honourable, caring, just, truthful and free.

We cannot allow this War Memorial and its equivalents in every community to become simply objects of historical interest any more than we should allow the Cross to become an ornament. They are rooted in our past, commemorating formative events in our history, but they are also there to shape the values of our future, values that we lose at our peril, values that we honour by being here today. Amen.