

One hundred years ago today, we were at war.

In August 1914 we went to war with an army of just 120,000 men, a number quickly supplemented by a torrent of volunteers. In November 1914, the horrors of trench warfare still lay in the future, although huge numbers had already died at the first battle of Ypres. By the end of the war, nearly one million people from Britain would have died, over two million wounded, and worldwide, and although it is hard to be exact, over 15 million people had lost their lives as a result of the war, approaching 10 million in uniform. Unimaginable numbers.

One hundred years is a long time, yet the need to remember what happened then seems stronger than ever. I have scraps of information about my grandfather. He fought at Passchendaele, he was horribly wounded, but he survived – but I know no detail, that has now been lost. Every family has those half remembered stories. If you have visited the poppies at the tower, you will have been overawed by the scale. Each poppy represents not so much a death, but a life story. The full narrative of the first world war is woven out of millions of those stories.

We must hold on to those stories to ensure that we learn from the past, that such carnage can never be repeated. We must remind ourselves of the bravery and perseverance and endurance of those who fought, those who were wounded then sent back to the conditions they feared and loathed to fight again. What examples they set for us.

As we seek to understand this terrible war, it becomes clear that each country involved at the outbreak acted in the way that it felt was necessary to defend itself as a nation. In their own narrative, they went to war with the best of intentions. We need to understand how good intention and defence of the nation can so easily be misdirected to create ever increasing conflict.

The conflict caused the world map to be redrawn, and that has happened again many times since, often leading to peoples of different cultures and language being bounded by a single border; or people being separated from their kindred by arbitrary lines on a map. A nation should surely be defined as something to which its members can belong, a shared culture or ideology behind which its people can unite – yet the recent story of the nations of the world challenges this view. Diversity accompanied by genuine welcome and an acceptance of common identity can be a great blessing. Where that welcome and acceptance are missing, society itself fractures and identity becomes limited to clanship. It is happening in front of our eyes across the world. Blind nationalism, as history shows us, brings its own risks. We cannot complacently believe ourselves immune from those risks.

The mistakes of the past can and should inform the political decisions we make today; but on Remembrance Sunday we are here primarily to commemorate the indomitability of the human spirit. If we have any imagination, we can only wonder at those countless stories of sacrifice and bravery, and not least the bravery of those who were left behind, those who were widowed, those wives who found themselves caring for men broken by what they had experienced and who despite everything kept going, working tirelessly to rebuild their lives and the life of the nation. The moving letters from those at the front are testament to the humanity of the writers, when even in the midst of war, despite pain, and disease, and hunger, and loss, the ability to feel and care and love still holds firm.

It is that humanity that we must remember today. Those powerful individual stories, each one a part of the history of the nations. However hard we try, we cannot separate the individual from the national and the international. They are intertwined in a way that reinforces our understanding that we are all fellow members of the human race. When we lose sight of our compassion for all humanity, when we care only about our local interests and not about those of people who are of another culture or nation or faith, then our moral compass is severely compromised, and our nation is compromised and at risk of separating along other lines.

The great prophets of the Old Testament taught justice - Micah asking 'what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'

Jesus pushed even further at the boundaries of people's understanding of what it means to be fully human. He was not content that we should care only for those who are "like us". He told his disciples what to them would have been the deeply shocking story of the good Samaritan, the foreigner and stranger, of another faith and tribe but who was, nevertheless, the good neighbour. He taught us not just to love our family, or our clan, or our nation, but all people, even, most challengingly, our enemy. "Who is my neighbour" is the question he challenges us with again and again.

Today, as the evils of war in the world continue to have the ability to shock us profoundly, we stand in solemn silence to honour the past and protect the future. We remember with respect and gratitude the stories of those who gave their lives, and we reflect upon our own life's story and that of our nation. Is our story, is our nation's story one of honour, and compassion, and justice, full of humanity?

We cannot change what has been written. But the way we live now, that writes the future. Amen.