

Remembrance Sunday

Every year the list of war dead is lovingly read out on the 'roll call' and the familiar words are spoken:

**'Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will
remember them'.**

But who are they, the people behind the names we have never had the privilege to meet? Men from our churches that left Chilton/Harwell and never came home. When we think of the cost of the peace we enjoy, it is humbling and it makes the Remembrance day message challenging to deliver.

They are names that I don't know, families that I've never met, lives ended and lives changed, so that I/so that You can stand here in freedom. But at least we know who they were, many died and were buried, unidentified, being represented only by one solitary symbolic grave of the unknown soldier, lying in Westminster Abbey, amongst kings and queens.

A single body was chosen from a number of British servicemen exhumed from four different battle areas; he could have been anyone.

Nobody knows who the unknown soldier is, but God does, there are thousands of war graves around the world which remain unidentified, nameless, unknown soldiers to you and me, but not to God. He knows each and every one of them.

He was there when they fought and He was there when they died.

For me, that grave symbolises so many unknowns, it represents stories, that few others know, the everyday ones that never hit the headlines.

A published letter relating to the autobiography: The Tattooist of Auschwitz, said:

Everything in your book is true, and I know, because I was there. All history should come from the memories of those who lived it and be re told through their story.

A rabbi, has told me, that there is no Hebrew word for history, only for memory for remembering and that is how we will validate their suffering, by listening to and learning from those who were there, where ever they may have been.

So, today my roll call includes, verbatim memories

1st World War:

- 1)Bob Young
- 2)Kitty Eckersley

2nd World War:

- 3)The Dancer
- 4)The Daughter
- 5)Jean Mayland

6)The Husbands Story

From The War in Iraq:

I'm Sergeant Jack Dorgan, 7th Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers.

Private Bob Young was conscious right to the last. I lay alongside of him and said, "Can I do anything Bob?" He said "straighten my legs Jack" – but he had no legs.

Then he said get my wife's photo out of my pocket. I took the photo and put it in his hands. He couldn't move, he couldn't lift a finger, but somehow, he held his wife's photo on his chest. And that is how Bob Young died.

I'm Kitty Eckersley

There was only me in the house when the postman came. I ran down the stairs in my nightdress, snatched the letter off him, ran in and shut the door again.

I opened the letter and saw it was from his sergeant. It just said: 'I'm very sorry to tell you of the death of your husband.'

Well, that was as far as I could read. I don't really know what happened over the next few minutes, but I must have run out of my house as I was, in my bare feet, and banged on next door. They brought me some blankets and wrapped me up in them and sent for my mother, so she came home and treated me for shock. The letter was from his sergeant, so I thought perhaps it was an error. So, later on I wrote back to him, but I had another letter to say that he also had been killed. Then, later on, I got the official news.

I'm The Dancer

I still remember Friday 14th March. That evening we were dancing in the Lyceum cinema when the siren sounded. Bombers were overhead and we went to the cellar. Just after midnight, Mum felt poorly; we returned to the living room. A bomb crashed through the chimney. I was trapped in rubble and covered in soot. My legs were burning. My sister called out and lost consciousness. The rescue workers took us outside, it was cold. The ambulance arrived and took us to hospital. Next day my uncle realised Mum had not been rescued. He dug her body out of the rubble....

My sister and I were so ill. Eventually the surgeon decided to amputate my right leg... When I was discharged, I hobbled on crutches, on and off buses, carrying shopping.

In 1942, I met my husband and I got my first artificial leg. We lived in Quarry Flats, where I was to pull my son and his pushchair up 45 steps.

I'm The Daughter

It starts with my grandfather who lost his arm in WW1 and his son in WW2. He was my father figure and a constant reminder of war and its effects upon people and families. So, I was aware of the effects of war even before I was old enough to know that my own father had died at Arnhem – when in September 1944 he was shot down and his parachute didn't open. I was born in January 1945. My mother did not have the confirmation of my father's death

until 8th May, VE Day. As everyone else celebrated, her loss was proved. My grandfather, never attended church after that and never spoke to me about his beliefs... The effects of war are still present in our family.

I'm Jean Mayland a visitor to Khatyn.

The people of Belarus suffered intensely in the second World War. As the Germans conquered, they followed a deliberate policy of extermination of the people.

In October 1987, I was one of the committee members for European Christian women visiting Khatyn whose entire population had been exterminated. On March 22 1943 the life of Khatyn came to an end. Soldiers entered the village drove all the inhabitants into a barn, to which they set fire. When they tried to escape, they were shot by machine guns. One hundred and forty-nine people died, among them seventy-five children. Only one man survived.

Our group of women walked slowly round, stopping to pray before the black memorial slab where an Eternal Flame burns.

At the end the German women in the group stood before the Eternal Flame in tears. She felt the guilt of the whole German nation on her shoulders. It was the Russian woman who went to her, put her arms round her, and said, "don't blame yourself. We must make sure it never happens again. We must work for peace".

I'm Jo's Husband

My wife, Jo, is an RAF doctor working as part of an aeromedical evacuation team in Iraq. It's her job to look after casualties as they are being flown out of the war zones, back to safer locations.

Unfortunately, she is there to certify the dead too.

Meanwhile, I'm at home looking after our one-year-old son, Alexander. She has missed her son's first birthday. Jo has also missed watching her son starting to crawl and speak and get more teeth.

I don't think most people realise civilian husbands of military personnel exist. All the talk is of supporting 'our boys' at war, and I find it very frustrating. It's not just husbands that have gone out there; it's wives and mothers too.

I wonder where she is, and what she is doing, and is she all right; and is she coming back?

There are many, many more such stories, from the Falklands War, the Gulf War, Afghanistan and many other conflicts but the picture is clear.... numerous men, women and children have been affected by war and, in some cases gave their lives, in order that others might live.

God continues to be on the dusty, pot holed roads and the smoke-filled air of today's raw suffering of our present war zones and in every place where there is conflict.

It seems in every war, almost without exception, courageous actions occur, mainly from individuals you have never heard of, but, as I have already said, God has, God knows them. No one is unknown to Him. He was there in the trenches of WW1, in the bomb sites of WW2 and when the telegrams bearing tragedy were opened. He was there in the hospitals when limbs were amputated and when the Eternal Flame was lit in Khatyn. He was with Jo in Iraq and her husband back home.

Behind each fact about war, is a person and behind them, a family, a group of friends, a community, a nation, that is different because of that one.

This is not just history, but as they would say in Hebrew, it is memory.

I want to share another story that is even more important to me.

In a small, Middle Eastern country over 2,000 years ago, Jesus was born.

In Jesus, God himself came to earth. He lived as one of us and then gave his life for us, reconciling us to God on the cross.

Through his death, we are forgiven, we are free not just from war and violence, but we have true freedom, in his name.

Every week here in church we celebrate that Jesus is REAL!
His sacrifice was REAL! His salvation is REAL!

And we also share the stories of Jesus. We discover, he gives us grace and forgiveness, and the knowledge that in Christ death is not the end, and love, not violence is the final word.

And so, we sing the wondrous story, of the Christ who died for me, we will sing it with His saints in glory...

And as we sing in freedom, we will remember them.