

Reflection for Remembrance Sunday

The address given by Adrian Masson

at the St Margaret's Remembrance Sunday Service on 14 November 2021

The readings were Job 19.21–27, 1 Corinthians 15.51–57 and John 6.37–40

Good morning. I have a question for you. Tell me - who has heard of Robert Laurence Binyon? Well, he was the author of a poem published in *The Times* in September 1914, in the early months of the First World War. The poem is very patriotic and tends to glorify war but ironically in the middle is that wonderful verse which we shared earlier that has formed part of our annual act of remembrance and the act of remembrance of many other countries around the world -

'they shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old ... we will remember them.'

OK - here's another question. Who has heard of John Maxwell Edmonds?

He wrote poems and epitaphs and authored those other words we said earlier as part of our act of remembrance. They were first published in *The Times* in February 1918, towards the end of the First World War, at a time when attitudes had hardened and the glory of war had worn thin. Ironically his words are now more closely associated with the Second World War since they were adopted as the inscription on the memorial to those who lost their lives in the WW2 Battle of Kohima in what was northern Burma.

'When you go home, tell them of us and say, for their tomorrow, we gave our today.'

Being asked to provide a reflection for Remembrance Sunday, is both an honour and a huge challenge, because remembrance means different things to different people.

For many it is both historic and military, something that younger minds may have difficulty relating to. Others may feel their military contribution has been forgotten or their experiences misunderstood, as highlighted by Tony Robinson's recent TV series *Forgotten Wars*. But for some it is contemporary, it is very real and an ever-present reminder of the pain of lives lost, of bodies broken and deep and awful memories that cannot be removed, just hidden away. So, to try and navigate us safely through the potential minefield of remembrance, I am going to share with you just three brief thoughts, inspired by the words of those two WW1 poets.

The fortunes of war is a familiar but rather odd expression. After all what is fortunate about war? But when we say the words 'they shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old' we come face to face with the reality that at times the fortunes of war are inexplicable and there is little justice or fairness. Why is it that some families suffered terribly during the major conflicts of the 20th century but others, including mine, fought but survived? Why is it that some folk on the front line lose their lives or are casualties and others make it safely through? I wouldn't dare to venture an opinion on such a sensitive issue, except to acknowledge that it is as real today as it was in the past. The causes of war are well documented and generally well understood. However, the outcomes of conflict are hugely stressful, sometimes horrific and difficult to comprehend.





When I was at sea I belonged to the Naval Christian Fellowship. NCF we called it. And the NCF used as its watchword the text from Proverbs 3:5 **‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding’** – a verse I often had to remind myself of as events in the South Atlantic and the Gulf unfolded.

Turning to my second thought I look to the Royal British Legion, who state that ‘remembrance honours the service and sacrifice of our Armed Forces, veterans and their families. They protect our way of life’. As a former Naval Officer, as you would expect I agree with this and certainly, this is reflected in the services, festivals and parades that are held annually. But, and I think it is a rather important ‘but’, non-combatants have never been immune from war and particularly since WW2, war waged against the civilian population has become a means of achieving military and political advantage. Arguably, it has become as much a part of modern warfare as the conflict on the front-line. Think of the Blitz and Hiroshima and more recently Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East. So perhaps, when we utter those words ‘we will remember them’ as well as acknowledging the service and sacrifice of our Armed Forces and veterans, we should also reflect on the breadth of mankind who have been, and are still being, affected by the horrors of war.

My final thought stems from the words of both poets. Like it or not, we are those who are left and are growing older. We are also those living the tomorrow for which others gave their lives. And we are fighting many battles, but thankfully at the moment ones that challenge us in different

ways. As the events of the last two weeks have acutely reminded us, we live on a planet that desperately needs our love and care if it is to serve the tomorrows of our children and our children’s children as well it has served us. We live in a world that increasingly creates military, political and religious tensions and these are very real. Others are drawing up the strategies and plans of combat of which we, maybe unwittingly, are a part. So perhaps we are now the soldiers in the trenches of a very different battlefield but still have an important role to play.

Hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah wrote to the embattled nation of Israel:

**‘So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous
right hand.’** (Isaiah 41:10 NIV)

These words would have helped sustain generations of Christians struggling with conflict over the centuries and I hope will sustain us too in whatever struggles lie ahead.