

2 Sam 1:17-27
 Rom 8:31-39
 John 15:9-17

2Sam 1:17-18 “And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and Jonathan his son, and he said (The Song of) The Bow should be taught to the people of Judah.”

These words record what might well be regarded as the first institution of an act of remembrance. Of course, the ancient Israelites had nothing remotely corresponding to the formal act of remembrance which we are observing today, and which was indeed not established until after the First World War. But what the Israelites did have was lamentation, both as a form of literature and a part of their liturgy.

Our OT lesson from 2 Sam 1:17-27 is a particularly beautiful and moving lamentation composed by David to commemorate the tragedy of the Battle of Gilboa. Many years of conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines came to a head at this battle, in which many Israelites were killed, including Jonathan and the two other sons of Saul, the Israelite king. Seeing how hopeless the situation was Saul committed suicide by falling on his sword (or according to another account, got someone to kill him). The Israelites were utterly routed, and the Philistines overran the land.

David's lamentation, apparently called “The Bow”, is not really a lamentation over all who lost their lives in the battle, so much as a lamentation for his very close friend Jonathan and Jonathan's father, Saul.

But in as far as David expresses what the tragic loss of Jonathan and Saul meant to him, he also expresses something of the impact that the Battle of Gilboa must have had on the lives of countless others who had lost loved ones.

David's lament includes such memorable words as:

“Thy glory, O Israel, is slain upon thy high places! How are the mighty fallen!

Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon; lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult ...

From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, and the sword of Saul returned not empty.

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions ...

How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!
 Jonathan lies slain upon thy high places.

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.”

In this lament, David is very generous in his tribute to Saul, with whom he had had a rather troubled relationship. If you wanted to be a little cynical, you could suggest that David composed this lament to endear himself to those in the nation who had been loyal to Saul. After all, in due course, David was able to assume the kingship only after a short civil war with what remained of the House of Saul. But I am convinced that David's lament came from his heart, and was very sincere.

David gave instructions that it was to be taught to the people of Judah, which meant that each time it was uttered, the tragic deaths of Jonathan and Saul would be remembered.

Today we have a very special day of remembrance. For it is one hundred years since the First World War came to an end (at least on the western front), and in addition to that, Armistice Day coincides with Remembrance Sunday. One hundred years ago today at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918 the Armistice was signed, which brought to an end the Great War, which had lasted over four years. [Though actually, there were places beyond the western front where hostilities between some of the combatants continued even into the 1920s].

The First World War was one of the deadliest of human conflicts ever, and was on a scale that is difficult to comprehend, involving the mobilisation of 70 million military personnel throughout the world, with the death of over nine million combatants, and millions of casualties, many with injuries that would maim them for life. The war also is also said to have led to the death of seven million civilians. It was characterised by the trench warfare of battles like the Somme and Passchendaele, in which the application of technology to high intensity individual man to man combat caused carnage on a scale never before seen, in appalling conditions which none of us alive today can even begin to appreciate. It led to the loss of a whole generation of young men, many of whom volunteered freely for military service, some of the younger ones even lying about their age, so that they could be enlisted.

There was hardly a community or a family who did not lose someone.

Earlier in the service the names of those from this church who gave their lives in that war were read out together with the names of those who died in the Second World War. It is likely that most of you have family members who were killed in the First World War. In my own family, my grandmother lost a brother as well as a fiancée, and my great grandmother also lost a brother. Last week I paid a visit to my home town and was able to go to see the names of the two family members on the local war memorials.

The British Legion website says, "Of the hundreds of thousands of cities, towns and villages in Britain, only 53 (in England and Wales) were fortunate enough not to have members of their communities die in the war. They were known as 'Thankful Villages', where all those who left to serve came home again. Not one Thankful Village exists in Scotland or Ireland, where every single community lost someone to the war."

The First World War also caused the map of Europe to be greatly changed, with old empires vanishing and new nation states emerging, and produced grievances which only 21 years later led to the Second World War.

The Second World War was more of a global war than the First, and was even more deadly. When one takes into account not only those who were killed in armed combat, but also the strategic bombing, the genocide of the Holocaust, various massacres, deaths from starvation and disease, and the use of nuclear weapons right at the end, it was a war with more than 50 million, and perhaps as many as 80 million fatalities.

Unlike the First World War, the events of the Second World War took place within the living memory of many still alive today, including some of you present at this service, and I know that some of you served in the armed forces during the war.

The Second World War was just a little before my time. I am part of the so-called post-war baby boom. And the world in which I grew up was one in which the war was still a very fresh memory in my parents' generation.

The youngsters growing up in today's world are much further removed from the events of the war than my generation was.

Those lucky enough to have great-grandparents still alive can even now hear first-hand accounts of experiences of military service, and what life was like during the years of the war. But the number of those still with us to describe their experiences is getting fewer as the years go by.

The events that we commemorate on Remembrance Sunday must never be forgotten. The Act of Remembrance brings together people of all ages, and its importance does not diminish as the years go by.

Sadly, mankind seems to have learned little from the catastrophe of the two world wars, and many have lost their lives in conflicts that have taken place since. It is a sobering experience to visit the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire and to see the names of those who have given their lives in military service since the Second World War displayed on the memorial. On Remembrance Sunday we honour their memory too.

As far as the Christian faith is concerned in the western world, the two world wars accelerated a process of decline in church attendance that had already begun in the 19th century. In part this was simply because of the disruptive effect of those wars. But it was also much more than that. Those who had had some horrific experiences, and those who had lost loved ones, found their Christian faith severely challenged. It was only natural, and very proper, to ask how the all loving and all powerful God of Christian teaching could possibly allow such evil to be unleashed and to permit so much suffering. These are questions to which every Christian believer needs to give some thought, and I do not claim to have the answers.

But I do believe that the Christian faith has something relevant and meaningful to say on Remembrance Sunday. Today we reflect upon the sacrifice made by so many, who were willing to give their lives so that we could enjoy the freedoms which we all too easily take for granted in today's world. At the centre of the teaching of the Church is a message that our redemption was achieved at a great cost.

Jesus put it like this in John 6:13: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." In Romans 8, St Paul asks the question: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

His answer is: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This is a tremendous assurance at the very heart of the Gospel which we proclaim.