

Remembrance

Remembering the sacrifice, working for peace

Some of you may have heard of a man named Harold Patch, better known as Harry. If you haven't, there are some things you should know about Harry Patch.

Harry was British, and he was the last surviving combat soldier of the First World War from any country - enemy or ally. He died in 2009 at the age of one hundred eleven.

Harry was called up at the age of 19 to serve in the British infantry and he was conscripted to Belgium. He knew what to expect before he went to Belgium because his older brother William had warned him. William had been wounded a year before and was sent home to convalesce. When Harry enlisted, William told him, "You are in for absolute Hell. It's as bad as it gets."

So, unlike most of the eager, enthusiastic young men who left home to go and fight in World War One, Harry went off knowing clearly what lay ahead on the killing fields of the western front.

The allied assault at Passchendale began in the early hours of July 31st 1917. Because of the torrential rains, the British and Canadian troops found themselves fighting not only the Germans, but a quagmire of stinking mud that swallowed up men, horses and tanks.

After three months, one week and three days of brutal trench warfare, the allies finally recaptured the village of Passchendale, but by then around a third of a million allied soldiers had either been killed or badly wounded in some of the most horrific trench warfare of World War One.

Harry Patch was wounded at Passchendale, but he survived a blast that killed three of his best friends. Along with some other battle-weary comrades, he was given the task of clearing out the trenches that were full of mangled bodies and parts of bodies.

For most of the next 90 years, following the trauma he had suffered at Passchendaele, Harry grieved in private. He kept secret the horrors he had witnessed until shortly before his death.

In 2005 he went back to Belgium to the village of Passchendaele to shake the hand of Charles Kuentz, Germany's only surviving veteran from the First World War. "He was a gentle, kind man," Harry recalled. "We were both 107 years old. We had had 87 years to think about what war is. To me," said Harry, "it's a licence to go out and murder. Why should the government call me up and send me out to a battlefield in a strange country to kill men I don't even know, whose language I can't speak? All those lives lost over a

war that was finished by signing a piece of paper at a table somewhere. Now what is the sense in that?"

Harry wasn't finished. "It wasn't worth it," he went on. "No war is worth the loss of even a couple of lives, let alone thousands. Thousands of lives were lost... It makes me angry. I felt then, as I still feel now, that the politicians who took us to war should have been given the guns and told to settle their differences themselves, instead of organizing nothing better than the calculated and condoned slaughter of human beings."

Harry Patch left no doubt in anyone's mind as to what he thought about war.

Unfortunately, even with the sacrifice of so much life on the battlefields of World War One, it was not "the war to end all wars", and many millions of lives have been lost in all the wars and conflicts that have happened all over the world in the 100 years since November 11th, 1918.

Bearing in mind that most people, most of the time, want little more from life than to live in peace with their families, friends and neighbours in their home communities, then why wasn't World War One "the war to end all wars"? What went wrong and continues to go wrong today?"

It seems hopeless. It turns out that war does not put an end to war. History tells us that even the best efforts at peace-making and peace-keeping fail to bring any true and lasting peace.

We tend to think of "peace" as the absence of war - that there will be world peace when all wars cease. The violence and conflict that we continue to witness all over our world is a stark reminder that God's vision for peace on earth is getting farther out of reach, not closer, and Jesus' call for us to love one another is becoming more important than ever.

So here we are on this, another Remembrance Day, 100 years later, honouring, remembering, and expressing our gratitude to the men and women who have served and continue to serve our country during times of war and times of relative peace, not only in the first and second world wars, but in all the subsequent conflicts and peace-keeping missions, of which, sadly, there have been far too many.

We honour their sacrifices, and the lives lost, the lives torn apart, the lives forever changed as a result of service to our country and its people. And so we should - and so we should. We owe them a tremendous debt. They risked their lives for us, they lay down their lives for us, they fought for our freedom. And may we always remember that our freedom has never been free. It has come at great cost.

So as Christians we are called to remember and to strive to be peacemakers. As members of a Christian community, we may have different opinions as to whether war is right or wrong - probably because of the difference between the people we are and the people that God created us to be.

We were created in the image and likeness of a loving God for the purpose of being a loving people. In the short passage from the gospel of John, chapter 15, that Diane read for us, the word 'love' appears 9 times. This passage is part of the final message of Jesus to his disciples at their last supper together, and it says, in plain and simple terms, that we should love one another as God has loved us.

In the event of war, then, does that mean that we should all be pacifists or conscientious objectors?

On the other hand, we may feel that we can be called to fight justly in a war, using weapons of evil for a greater good - for the development of the kingdom of God on earth. The prophet Micah says, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Doing justice often requires a battle against injustice.

But this isn't the time or place to have a debate about justifying war, and I believe it is something we each have to work out for ourselves in any case. (Living Faith 8.5.1 - 8.5.3)

Most of us will never be called to put our lives on the line as our veterans and all those who we remember today have done. But as Christians and Canadians we have a calling and a duty to work to create communities that are safe for all people.

We honour the sacrifice and service of those we remember today by doing whatever we can to make life better for our neighbours and our communities.

We honour and remember their sacrifice when we take seriously our citizenship and the rights and responsibilities that come with it.

We honour and remember their sacrifice when we do our best to build a country and a world where all people can live in harmony and peace.

As Christians, we have faith that our God is the ultimate peacemaker. It is the peace of God that passes all understanding that has the power to really change lives and situations for the better.

And so today we remember. How we remember and what we do with our remembering matters. When you remove your poppy from the coat or jacket it's been on these past several days, take a moment to think about what you will do with the 'remembering' it symbolizes. Will we all put our 'remembering' away with our poppies until this time next year when we get it out again and dust it off?

Let that little poppy be a symbol of the vision God calls us to take up in all of our tomorrows - individually, as a community, as a nation - that by working for peace, we will remember the sacrifices made for us. Sincere and true remembering is about how we live our lives to prove ourselves worthy of those sacrifices.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN