

Dulce et Decorum Est?



They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

These famous lines, from the middle of Laurence Binyon's poem *For the Fallen* forms the Exhortation within many services of Remembrance and is familiar, I imagine, to most of us. In many ways, these lines encapsulate what we think of as 'remembrance': the dead are crystallised in some sort of eternal fallen flower of youthfulness. There is a nostalgia there, with sunrises, sunsets and the memory of loss. The poem reminds us of the need to remember those who died in war; a sacrifice for all of us who enjoy freedom and peace. The rest of the poem sets the dead of war in a universe of eternal stars; heroes who proudly went to battle singing songs and whose lives are glorified in death.

One hundred years on from the end of the First World War, we have lost the last people who actually experienced it; all we have left to us is memory – histories, photographs, reports and newspapers, and the accounts of children and grandchildren of what their parents and grandparents told them. This raises an interesting question about how we now go on to remember the Great War and what we choose to forget. And sometimes what we choose to forget is the stinging force of Wilfred Owen's poem *Dulce et Decorum Est* and take its title at its face value – it is beautiful and glorious to die for one's country.

We too often choose the heroic over the horror but nonetheless it is in the horror that we learn the lessons of war and what human beings are capable of doing to one another. Heroism emerges in relation to the horror, not in isolation from it. We forget the fear and the suffering in favour of the outcome. We value bravery and honour over the shell-shock and sickness. The cost was (and is) more than death. The experience of war alienates soldiers from loved ones so that coming home can be lonelier and more difficult than the experience of war itself. How can you ever tell the people you loved what you saw, what you did? Who will understand, except the people who were actually there? It is easy for us to say 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning' but for many in the trenches, these were the most terrifying and treacherous times of day: misty, unbelievably cold, overwhelmed by exhaustion, waiting for the relief, the moment when the patient sniper would get his chance...

In 2014, to mark the centenary of the outbreak of hostilities the Mission Theology Advisory Group created *Faith and Love in the First World War*, a set of resources, which highlight some of the horrors of war and bring to mind, as we remember the fallen, just what their experiences were like. We created resources called Mud, Rats, Lice, Poppies, Cigarettes, Daughters, Ghosts, Guns, Wire, Gas, and Shrapnel.*

In the first set of resources we noted that as millions of human lives were destroyed, so was the natural world. Trees, fields, animals, plants, farming and agriculture were shelled and mined into oblivion creating a landscape of mud, perfect conditions in which rats could multiply and lice invade the seams of every soldier's uniform.

In the second set we remembered people left at home: the wives become widows, the daughters who never married, and the rise in an interest in Spiritualism, as people desperate to know what had become of their loved ones sought answers, any answers, from beyond the grave.

In the last set, we looked at the First World War as a watershed in military engagement, the first time the technology of war did the killing rather than hand-to-hand combat. You did not see the hand behind the gas, the bullet, the shell fragment that lodged in your body. With the advent of drone warfare, it is worth remembering the force of that change, the horror of facing what is mindless and destructive as men went over the top and charged into No Man's Land.

We might learn, too, from the spiritual questions raised by remembering. In our resources we reflect on a funeral held for a man's moustache because it was all that was left of him, and we muse on the strange tale of a soldier interred alive by one shell and resurrected by a second as he was blown out of his grave, losing a leg in the process. We remember the surgeon who lost a hand and who raged against a God whom he labelled a 'disgrace' for not acting to intervene in the monstrous horror. These stories raise questions for all of us about who God is and how God acts in the world. Where is God in our human wars today?

Remembering requires acknowledgement of the horror of war because the horror provides the context for the bravery, the fear, the powerful bonds of friendship and all the lessons we seek to take away from the engagement of our nation and our allies in the theatres of war. We can only truly 'remember them' if we agree to learn those lessons and apply them today.

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* You can find more information about these resources by going to germinate.net and searching 'CW79 Resources'.