

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY

MARK 12:41-44  
A COMMUNITY STORY

43 names, 43 stories we have told since August 2014; people like brothers James and William Dea, whose mother still lived in Redthorne across from Iceland when they died; James a teacher who went to war and died in April 15; William died 2 years later at Passchendaele. People like Adam Williamson and Donald Mackenzie, 18 and 19 years old, both grew up in Curriemuirend; did they go to school together? Were they best friends? They died a few days apart in the same battle, serving in different regiments. The only woman among them was Constance Steell, a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse who died in Bradford Hospital, where she worked. People like Dr Ian Macfarlane, a son of the manse, living in the house we now live in, training to be a doctor, he died in Egypt during the war, laying down his life while saving soldier after soldier from typhus.

“There but not there” is the theme of our silhouettes. We have 8 of them spread through the building today; some of you are brave enough to sit near them; they represent these 43 people and their stories. Some of you have been quite moved by hearing these stories as we’ve told them over the last 4 years; some of you (like me) have discovered a connection because someone lived in the house you now live in, or in the street. I had a message this week, after we set up our poppies outside, from a lady who is a descendant of one of these men, one of the names on the list, he was her grandfather’s youngest brother. She still lives in Juniper Green; the family in 1918 lived in Pentland Villas, Juniper Avenue. You have taken some wooden crosses to remember people in your families who died and whose stories maybe only you know or maybe you don’t know. All of these are connections with people who are not here, but whose memories and stories live on. Today we remember these people, their stories and how they connect with us.

“There but not there” could almost be a question of faith in the world of war, violence and suffering. Is God there or not there? Carol Ann Duffy, the Poet Laureate, has written a poem for this Remembrance season, called “The Wound in Time”; it is a reflection on war and how that war has continued beyond the end of World War One. There is a line in the poem that begins: “the end of God”. That was true that for many men who experienced the horror of war, the mud, the trenches, and their suffering; for them it made them not only question their faith, but give up their faith altogether. “God has gone away and deserted us; God has abandoned the world, if this is the kind of suffering that we experience.” For many, their experience of war was “the end of God” and they gave up on the sense of God loving the world. God was certainly not there, as far as they were concerned.

But there are other ways of seeing. The Salvation Army canteen truck behind the Vimy ridge, serving tea to soldiers coming and going to battle at all times of the day. Pictures of army chaplains, clergymen, behind the front lines, talking with the soldiers, holding little acts of worship with people in the pauses between their time in the front line; there are even stories of chaplains acting as bearers of the wounded from the front lines back to the medical centres, putting their lives in danger for the sake of wounded, dying men. If the ambassadors of Christ are there, perhaps it is not too hard to make the next step to see that Christ is there with His people, God amongst these men even in mud and suffering.

“Jesus of the scars” is poem written by man called Edward Shillito about whom we know almost nothing; we’re not sure whether he served in the war, but his poem was published in 1919. It was written to reflect the notion that Jesus was there, in the war, suffering alongside His people. The poem speaks of Jesus with thorn marks in His brow; it speaks of our wounds hurting us and we are looking for balm; it speaks of Jesus’ wounds and we know what these wounds are like by our experience of life and suffering; finally the poem speaks of Jesus’ own

weakness, stumbling towards the cross, and it finishes with these words: "But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak/ And not a god has wounds but Thou alone." Shillito speaks of Jesus bearing the scars of His cross, walking with other people who bear scars, in this case of war, but these could be the scars of any other human experience.

2 thoughts to finish with: first of all, the cross is the place where God stands alongside our suffering world and shares in that suffering. Jesus' cry: "*My God...*" (*Mark 15:34*) reflects something profound in Jesus' relationship with our world. The creed says that Jesus "descended into hell" and here is that spiritual experience in His own words; He is God-forsaken, abandoned, left to suffer apart from God, in a sense. So He stands alongside us when we visit dark places; so Christians can affirm that even in the hell of the trenches, Jesus was there, Jesus of scars knows what it feels like to think that God is not there anymore. We know the end of Jesus' story – resurrection – but I think we get there too quickly without lingering more on the meaning of the cross; Jesus identifying with our fallen, sinful, suffering world to save us from our sin and to bring us peace and healing. The cross is the place where Jesus stands alongside us and says "I know... I understand... I love the world and I care for you."

The second thought is from Psalm 46, part of which we read earlier. The man of faith who wrote Psalm 46 sees a troubled world, a troubled life, and a troubled city; the earth gives way, the mountains are crashing, the flood waters are rising. God is not there? His faith sees the exact opposite: "*God is...*" "*God with in her.*" (*Psalm 46:1,5*) For all that life and the world is troubled, God is there; God is ever-present; God is within His people and will not leave or abandon us. "No matter what happens, Jesus is still Lord."

We suffer the most awful things as human beings; the stories from World War One bear that out; we wince when we hear what people had to put up with in these 4 years. People still have to bear awful things of all sorts; what are we to say? "The end of God"? God is not there anymore? Or do we see Jesus on the cross, God suffering alongside our troubled world? God ever-present still? God within His people? What do we see? "There and always there" would be a good way to end, affirming as graciously as we can that in the midst of a suffering world, the love of Jesus endures forever.

### **Our remembrance Service – some notes!**

Silhouettes – there were 8 of them to represent the 43 people whose stories we've told over the last 4 years, these names on our war memorials; the silhouettes came from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund, free to us for using them and telling them how we have used them; I took one to primary school on Friday.

The Book – Hamish has produced a draft copy of a book with the stories we have told; it is illustrated with images from the slides and has the text that we have used over these last 4 years telling the stories of our 43 people. The final copy will be smaller but will stay in church and will be resource for you if you want to know more or revisit a story.

The Poppies outside have been knitted by May Mitchell and a number of other women; there are between 800-900 of them altogether. This display inside was created at Messy Church last Saturday. The wooden Crosses – some have names from the war memorials, some you have put there; I plan to take them away on Wednesday so if you want to keep your own one rescue it before then.

About 30 minutes ago, in 1918, a telegram was sent to all Allied units along the front line, with the order that at 11am the guns should go silent and all hostilities should cease. Till 11am,

however, the fighting continued, right up until 11am on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month. 100 years on, strangely we are here on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month and at 11am we will mark the moment when the fighting ceased and “the war to end all wars” came to an end. Sadly, that hope was not to be and war still goes, and still we pray for peace. Let’s worship God...

**The Guard of Honour** – there are ten people who are part of our church family who have served in the forces, some full-time, some by National Service; they will come to the front and I have asked them to introduce themselves and tell you how they served. Absent is Gordon Campbell who did National Service with the RAF 1954-6, becoming a leading Aircraftsman; Jen Laver is here and she served in World War 2 in the NAAFI (Navy, Army, Air Force Institutes) 1941-3 in Huddersfield. (Later, I learned that Ian Riddell served in the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry during World War 2, becoming a sergeant)