Remembrance Day Sermon 2018

Witney Parish Church

In the last year or so the secretary to the

Witney Town Council planning group

has tapped out the minutes,

meeting after meeting.

Minutes that tell the story

of much of the work behind events today:

with the Leys memorial and the poppy tribute.

Do tell the secretary...

Someone has read ***all*** the minutes…

As I read them, I was struck by how much effort

has gone into planning this Remembrance Day:

Effort, energy and imagination expended here in Witney

and replicated in towns and cities across the country.

Remembering really matters.

Remembering:

One hundred years ago today

a nib scratched on a piece of paper...

ink bringing hope and new possibility.

The Armistice was signed.

The First World War was over.

They hoped it would be the war to end all wars...

Swords beaten into ploughshares,

Spears into pruning hooks…

But it wasn’t to be.

*So many and so much to be remembered.*

*We do remember them.*

But why does it matter so much?

I've been pondering that.

What does it mean to remember?

Remembering is a drama in two acts:

Act One: Looking back (remembering)

Act Two: Turning forward in hope.

Remembering isn't about being stuck in the past:

it is about letting the stories of the past

affect the way we shape our future.

Coventry Cathedral – is a place that tells a story –

A story that spells out the importance of

looking back and turning forward in hope.

One night in 1940 Coventry was

hammered by incendiary bombs.

Picture the flames and the cries of those

trying to tackle the fires.

Noise, smoke, flame and fear.

Coventry cathedral was left open to the skies -

full of rubble and destruction,

Can you imagine it?

Scanning the ruins, the cathedral stonemason

spotted two wooden beams lying in the shape of a cross.

He tied them together as a sign of forgiveness and hope.

The old, old story of the power of

Jesus' death and resurrection

told again,

through the very building itself.

Hope from ruins.

Beginning in an ending.

New life from death.

In an act of inspiration

the ruins of the old cathedral were left standing,

and a new cathedral built next to them,

the old and the new linked by a huge connecting canopy.

When you stand in the ruins of the old cathedral

and look across to the great glass window of the new,

etched with saints and dancing angels,

a strange thing happens.

You see your reflection in the glass.

You stand emerging from the ruins behind,

surrounded by saints and angels.

Before you - the reality of the new cathedral,

Behind are - the ruins of the old.

You are standing in an act of remembrance

Looking back and moving forward.

It feels inherently hopeful.

The first act in the drama of remembrance

is remembering - looking back,

seeing, experiencing, noticing.

What is there in the wounds of history that is valuable?

What must we mark, take up and treasure?

* The **courage** of young men who fell in Flanders fields,

fear fought down, duty undertaken.

* The **grief** borne by countless families,

with empty spaces at the dinner table.

* The **skill** of medical personnel,

in field hospitals from the Somme to Camp Bastion.

* The **loyalty** of horses at Verdun,

Skilled sniffer dogs in Afghan compounds.

* The **kindness** of strangers who knit socks and send gifts.

Did you know that the famous Witney blankets

were a treasured and practical sign of comfort

to many men on the Western Front?

A little piece of home in a strange and foreign land.

Perhaps Harry Hooper,

the first Witney man to die in the First World War –

had such a piece of Witney with him in his dugout.

The book *Remembered*,

written by Jeff Clements,

records the stories of the men

on the war memorials of Witney,

It’s a fascinating read.

It tells of young men,

who enlisted in the First World War.

It gives an account of their background,

where they were deployed and how they died,

offering countless little details,

which bring these young men

from black and white into colour.

No longer just names carved into a stone memorial,

but living breathing people.

Sons, husbands, fathers, friends…

Sidney Beale, born Broad Hill, Witney,1892

youngest son of Robert,

a blanket finisher, married to Jane…

killed in action – the Somme, July 1916

Walter Bridgman, born High Street Witney, 1892

Son of Frederick, a blanket finisher, married to Prudence…

Presumed dead 6th August, Galipoli, 1915

Earnest Godfrey, born Corn Street Witney, 1893

son of a mop maker, married to Susannah,

killed on the Western Front, 21st March 1918.

So many young men of Witney:

Fishmongers, drapers, blanket makers,

Labourers, ironmongers, publicans…

Story after story of courage and camaraderie

Shock and suffering –

of lives lost, grieving families and friends,

young widows, fatherless children.

*So many and so much to be remembered.*

*We do remember them.*

Today we look back and we remember

all affected by war down through the years:

Soldiers, families

friends, neighbours.

Those left homeless and rootless.

Those who know the horrors of the flashback,

hyperalert, unable to switch off;

Those with bodies maimed,

and minds bruised.

We remember the fallout in family life

when home seems strange

and the one returned is not the one who left.

*So many and so much to be remembered.*

*We do remember them*

The second act in the drama of remembrance –

Is looking forward in hope.

Hope is an act of faith – believing in new possibility.

An act of trust – reaching out to God.

An act of defiance – refusing to despair,

refusing to be bowed by cynicism.

Hope believes that nothing is wasted

 and nothing ultimately lost:

To God the unknown soldier

is named and loved,

and carried home.

God knows all things,

understands all things,

judges all things with justice and mercy:

the cruel capacity of human evil

and the deep potential for kindness,

compassion, courage and love.

The Book of Revelation

from which our second bible reading came,

is full of images of war and destruction,

but these are all overshadowed

by the final images of hope.

The old order of things has passed way,

and St John sees a new reality,

a new heaven and earth.

His is a vision of hope.

Today as we look back and remember,

we must look forward,

daring to believe the possibility of a different reality;

pledging ourselves to be people of peace

in our attitudes and outlooks.

Hoping for a day when the technology of violence

is re- employed for peaceful ends:

swords into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks.

And when my cynical inner voice queries the possibility;

When I despair of our inhumanity

I hear again the mighty vision of St John,

crying out across the landscapes of war and suffering:

*'See, the home of God is among mortals*

*He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples,*

*and God himself will be with them;*

*he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

*Death will be no more;*

*mourning and crying and pain will be no more,*

*for the first things have passed away.’*

*And the one who was seated on the throne said,*

*‘See, I am making all things new.'*

Let us remember with gratitude

and chose to live in faithful hope.

Shaped in heart and mind as people who seek peace,

even in the midst of turmoil.

*For Jesus Christ, the one who was seated on the throne says,*

*‘See, I am making all things new.'*

Amen.

Revd Dr (Flt Lt) Kate Bruce

**Isaiah 2:2-5 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)**

2In days to come
    the mountain of the Lord’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
    and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
3    Many peoples shall come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
    to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
    and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
    and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
4He shall judge between the nations,
    and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
    and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
    neither shall they learn war any more.

5O house of Jacob,
    come, let us walk
    in the light of the Lord!

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. NRSV