**11th November 2018 Remembrance Sunday**

**Ecclesiastes 3.1-8, Isaiah 65.17-25**

One hundred years ago today the Armistice of 11 November 1918  ended fighting on land, sea and air in [World War I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I) between the [Allies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allies_of_World_War_I) and their opponent, [Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Empire). Also known as the Armistice of Compiegne from the place where it was signed, it came into force at 11 a.m. Paris time on 11 November 1918 ("the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month") and marked a victory for the Allies and a complete defeat for Germany, although not formally a surrender.

The armistice was signed in a railway carriage of the private train of Allied Supreme Commander, [Marshal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshal_of_France) [Ferdinand Foch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand_Foch),

The actual terms demanded that the fighting stop, that Germany evacuated and hand over its weapons and return all its prisoners.

Although the armistice ended the fighting, it needed to be prolonged three times until the [Treaty of Versailles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Versailles), which was signed on 28 June 1919, took effect on 10 January 1920

Although the information about the imminent ceasefire had spread among the forces at the front in the hours before, fighting in many sections of the front continued right until the appointed hour. At 11 am there was some spontaneous fraternization between the two sides. But in general, reactions were muted. A British corporal reported: "...the Germans came from their trenches, bowed to us and then went away. That was it. There was nothing with which we could celebrate, except cookies.’ On the Allied side, euphoria and exultation were rare. There was some cheering and applause, but the dominant feeling was silence and emptiness after 52 exhausting months of war.

Remembrance Day is about the past. We remember those who served their country and those who lost their lives. But we dishonour them if we do not remember why they had to fight and resolve to learn from the mistakes from the past to avoid war again.

Many historians believe that the seeds of the Second World War were sown in the armistice agreement initiated on this day one hundred years ago. In the UK general election five weeks after the armistice candidates won with slogans like ‘Make Germany pay: Hang the Kaiser!’. Consequently, the humiliation of Germany, the harsh conditions of reparations, led to resentment and a desire for revenge among Germans. 21 years later on 22 June 1940 in the very same railway carriage, in the very same spot in Compiegne where the 1918 Armistice was signed, [Adolf Hitler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Hitler) demanded and received [the surrender armistice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armistice_of_22_June_1940) from France. That railway carriage, the original in which the first Armistice was signed, was then carried off to Berlin as a trophy and a symbol of German revenge. The RAF later blew it and most of Berlin up.

How you treat your enemies is important. If you humiliate them and rub their noses in it, you will be storing up for yourselves a backlash of bitterness and a desire for revenge. It was not for nothing that Jesus called us to love our enemies – in other words treat them with the dignity you would want to be treated if you were the loser. How hard it can be to let go of the injuries we nurse, but how badly they hurt us when we do not.

When do we stop remembering the hurt and let it go? When do we let go of the past in order to build a better tomorrow?

The world is a dangerous place at the moment. The passions and pride that brought us into two world wars are still evident in human nature: a tribalism that is suspicious of the foreigner; scapegoating of minorities; a disregard for facts and the rule of law; divisive politics based on fear, rabble rousing and separatism. Let us remember history and learn from it.

Wilfred Owen was one of the leading poets of the [First World War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I). His [war poetry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_poetry) on the horrors of [trenches](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trench_warfare) and [gas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chemical_weapons_in_World_War_I) warfare stood in stark contrast both to the public perception of war at the time and to the confidently patriotic verse written by earlier war poets such as [Rupert Brooke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rupert_Brooke).

He was awarded the military cross for his service and gallantry – but he wanted to tell the war as it was and not give it a patriotic gloss. The speaker of the poem we heard read describes the gruesome effects of the gas on the man and concludes that, if one were to see first-hand the reality of war, one might not repeat platitudes like [*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dulce_et_decorum_est_pro_patria_mori): "How sweet and honourable it is to die for one's country."

Throughout the poem, and particularly strong in the last stanza, there is a running commentary, a letter to [Jessie Pope](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jessie_Pope), a civilian propagandist of World War I, who encouraged—"with such high zest"—young men to join the battle, through her poetry, e.g. "Who's for the game?"

The first draft of the poem, indeed, was dedicated to Pope. A later revision amended this to "a certain Poetess", though this did not make it into the final publication, either, as Owen apparently decided to address his poem to the larger audience of war supporters in general such as the women who handed out [white feathers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_feather) during the conflict to men whom they regarded as cowards for not being at the front.

Brought up as a devout Christian, Owen's experiences in war led him further to challenge his religious beliefs, claiming in his poem "Exposure" that "love of God seems dying".

Owen was killed in action on 4 November 1918 during the crossing of the [Sambre–Oise Canal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sambre%E2%80%93Oise_Canal), exactly one week (almost to the hour) before the signing of the [Armistice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armistice_of_11_November_1918) which ended the war, and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant the day after his death. His mother received the telegram informing her of his death on [Armistice Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armistice_Day), as the church bells in Shrewsbury were ringing out in celebration. Owen is buried at Ors Communal Cemetery, [Ors](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ors%22%20%5Co%20%22Ors), in northern France. The inscription on his gravestone, chosen by his mother Susan, is based on a quote from his poetry: "SHALL LIFE RENEW THESE BODIES? OF A TRUTH ALL DEATH WILL HE ANNUL" W.O

The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes, as we discovered last week, deals with brutal honestly too, and writes about reality as he sees it. This well-known passage in chapter three is ambiguous to say the least and appears on the surface to just describe life as it is:

A time to be born, a time to die ….

 **8**    a time to love and a time to hate,
    a time for war and a time for peace.

These are not exhortations – go to war! – do peace! Only descriptions. They are all part of human life as God created it, part of human life ‘under the sun’ as we experience it. The allusion to stones perhaps refers to the deliberate ruining of an enemy’s fields and the correlative clearing of the stones and perhaps the collection of them for making houses. Perhaps our modern-day equivalent would be the clearing of mines.

In most cases, perhaps in all, one pair of verbs denotes an activity that is preferable to the other, and one effect of the poem is then to rub people’s noses into the reality of human life. Death is as integral to life as birth, hate as much as love. The equal status of the positive and the negative is further suggested by the random order in which they appear – sometimes the positive comes first, sometimes the negative comes first. In other words, Ecclesiastes itself isn’t evaluating them as positive or negative. They are just realities.

The evaluation comes in the prose reflection afterwards.

***9****What do workers gain from their toil?****10****I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.****11****He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

The sovereign God’s lordship lies behind all these activities, but God hasn’t made it possible for humanity to make sense of them as aspects of some whole. Somewhat enigmatically Ecclesiastes declares that God has put eternity into our hearts. It suggests a yearning to understand the big picture about human life and about God’s activity in the world. The writer implies that there is such a big picture but from our position within the context of earthly life, ‘under the sun’, we can’t perceive what it is. All we see is the apparent random collection of contrasting activities and experiences that the poem describes. We are left with the longing questions: Why? Why the suffering? Why the wars? What was the point? Will we ever learn? Will we ever get there – will we ever see the end of war? Is there any meaning God? Or is all meaningless, random, uncertain?

The poet Thomas Hardy in his poem ‘And there was a great calm’ writes about the armistice and his last two lines say:

*The Sinister Spirit sneered: 'It had to be!'*

*And again, the Spirit of Pity whispered, 'Why?'*

The writer of Ecclesiastes doesn’t conclude that life is a waste of time and ends in despair, even suicide. Once more he urges people to settle for what we can have and do – enjoy our life, do what is good, eat and drink, enjoy the fruit of our labour and accept the gifts God has given us but also the limitations God has placed on us.

Verses 14-15 refers to entrusting the past to God:

***14****I know that everything God does will endure for ever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.*

***15****Whatever is has already been,
    and what will be has been before;
    and God will call the past to account*

Ecclesiastes of course was written before the coming of Christ. The Christian faith has its origin and centre in a man who was cruelly taken at the prime of his life, giving himself for others, demonstrating the love and forgiveness of God for all, even unto a painful suffering death on a cross.

Yet our faith was born through his resurrection and the hope that suffering and death is not the end and does not have the last word. So, the apostle Paul writes that our troubles achieve for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all (2 Cor 4.17-18).

The Book of Revelation (especially Ch. 5) pictures heaven as a place where God will wipe away every tear and death will be no more and mourning and crying and pain will be no more, and the singing will never be done – an echo of another poem you will hear in a moment by Siegfried Sassoon. There is a chance for redemption and justice and peace in God’s eternal plans.

That is the trajectory for the future according to the Christian faith. Hopefully Christians at least will remember where all life is ultimately going. Faith means letting go of our desire to control the future and understand the past.

At our Alpha Course meeting last week, we were reminded of a saying by Corrie Ten Boom, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps who said

*‘When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer.’*

We know that God knows what the big picture is, and we are called to trust him for it. Called to trust that God is at work in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

‘*See, I will create
    new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
    nor will they come to mind.* Is 65.17

One hundred years of remembering. Lest we forget the dedication, service and sacrifice of those who served their country. Lest we forget the reasons why wars begin. Lest we forget how to win the peace and love our enemies.

May one day everyone sing that war is no more and we trust with Wilfred Owen:

OF A TRUTH ALL DEATH WILL HE ANNUL"

Bibliography

John Goldingay, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs for Everyone,* SPCK, 2014

**For the Fallen**

BY [LAURENCE BINYON](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/laurence-binyon)

With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,

England mourns for her dead across the sea.

Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,

Fallen in the cause of the free.

Solemn the drums thrill; Death august and royal

Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres,

There is music in the midst of desolation

And a glory that shines upon our tears.

They went with songs to the battle, they were young,

Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.

They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted;

They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years contemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.

They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;

They sit no more at familiar tables of home;

They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;

They sleep beyond England's foam.

But where our desires are and our hopes profound,

Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,

To the innermost heart of their own land they are known

As the stars are known to the Night;

As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,

Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain;

As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,

To the end, to the end, they remain.

**Dulce et Decorum Est**

Launch Audio in a New Window

BY [WILFRED OWEN](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wilfred-owen)

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,

Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,

And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,

But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;

Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots

Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling

And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.—

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,

He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

*Pro patria mori.*

Notes:

Latin phrase is from the Roman poet Horace: “It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.”

**Everyone Sang**

BY [SIEGFRIED SASSOON](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/siegfried-sassoon)

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;

And I was filled with such delight

As prisoned birds must find in freedom,

Winging wildly across the white

Orchards and dark-green fields; on - on - and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;

And beauty came like the setting sun:

My heart was shaken with tears; and horror

Drifted away ... O, but Everyone

Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

**And There Was a Great Calm**

BY [THOMAS HARDY](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-hardy)

(On the Signing of the Armistice, 11 Nov. 1918)

                                       I

There had been years of Passion—scorching, cold,

And much Despair, and Anger heaving high,

Care whitely watching, Sorrows manifold,

Among the young, among the weak and old,

And the pensive Spirit of Pity whispered, “Why?”

                                       II

Men had not paused to answer. Foes distraught

Pierced the thinned peoples in a brute-like blindness,

Philosophies that sages long had taught,

And Selflessness, were as an unknown thought,

And “Hell!” and “Shell!” were yapped at Lovingkindness.

                                       III

The feeble folk at home had grown full-used

To 'dug-outs', 'snipers', 'Huns', from the war-adept

In the mornings heard, and at evetides perused;

To day-dreamt men in millions, when they mused—

To nightmare-men in millions when they slept.

                                       IV

Waking to wish existence timeless, null,

Sirius they watched above where armies fell;

He seemed to check his flapping when, in the lull

Of night a boom came thencewise, like the dull

Plunge of a stone dropped into some deep well.

                                       V

So, when old hopes that earth was bettering slowly

Were dead and damned, there sounded 'War is done!'

One morrow. Said the bereft, and meek, and lowly,

'Will men some day be given to grace? yea, wholly,

And in good sooth, as our dreams used to run?'

                                       VI

Breathless they paused. Out there men raised their glance

To where had stood those poplars lank and lopped,

As they had raised it through the four years’ dance

Of Death in the now familiar flats of France;

And murmured, 'Strange, this! How? All firing stopped?'

                                       VII

Aye; all was hushed. The about-to-fire fired not,

The aimed-at moved away in trance-lipped song.

One checkless regiment slung a clinching shot

And turned. The Spirit of Irony smirked out, 'What?

Spoil peradventures woven of Rage and Wrong?'

                                       VIII

Thenceforth no flying fires inflamed the gray,

No hurtlings shook the dewdrop from the thorn,

No moan perplexed the mute bird on the spray;

Worn horses mused: 'We are not whipped to-day;'

No weft-winged engines blurred the moon’s thin horn.

                                       IX

Calm fell. From Heaven distilled a clemency;

There was peace on earth, and silence in the sky;

Some could, some could not, shake off misery:

The Sinister Spirit sneered: 'It had to be!'

And again the Spirit of Pity whispered, 'Why?'