**8th November 2020: Remembrance Sunday**

**1 Thessalonians 4.13-18**

The British grave of **The Unknown Warrior[[1]](#endnote-1)** (often known as 'The Tomb of The Unknown Warrior') holds an unidentified British soldier killed on a European battlefield during the [First World War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_World_War).[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unknown_Warrior#cite_note-Hanson-1) He was buried in [Westminster Abbey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westminster_Abbey), London exactly one hundred years ago on 11 November 1920, simultaneously with a similar interment of a French unknown soldier at the [Arc de Triomphe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arc_de_Triomphe) in France, making both graves the first to honour the unknown dead of the First World War.

The idea of a Tomb of the Unknown Warrior was first conceived in 1916 by the Reverend [David Railton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Railton), who, while serving as an [army chaplain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_chaplain) on the [Western Front](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Front_(World_War_I)), had seen a grave marked by a rough cross, which bore the pencil-written legend 'An Unknown British Soldier'.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unknown_Warrior#cite_note-Memorial-2)

He wrote to the [Dean of Westminster](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dean_of_Westminster) in 1920 proposing that an unidentified [British](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armed_Forces_of_the_United_Kingdom) soldier from the battlefields in France be buried with due ceremony in Westminster Abbey "amongst the kings" to represent the many hundreds of thousands who had died in the war. The idea was strongly supported by the Dean and the Prime Minister [David Lloyd George](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Lloyd_George).[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unknown_Warrior#cite_note-Memorial-2)

Suitable remains were exhumed from various battlefields and brought to the chapel at [Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise) near [Arras](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arras), France on the night of 7 November 1920. The bodies were received by the Reverend George Kendall. Brigadier L.J. Wyatt and Lieutenant Colonel E.A.S. Gell went into the chapel alone. The remains were then placed in four plain coffins each covered by Union Flags: the two officers did not know from which battlefield any individual soldier had come. Brigadier Wyatt with closed eyes rested his hand on one of the coffins. The other soldiers were then taken away for reburial by Kendall.

The coffin of the unknown warrior then stayed at the chapel overnight and on the afternoon of 8 November, it was transferred under guard and escorted by Kendall, with troops lining the route, from Ste Pol to the medieval castle within the ancient citadel at [Boulogne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boulogne-sur-Mer).

The following morning, two undertakers entered the castle library and placed the coffin into a casket of the oak timbers of trees from [Hampton Court Palace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hampton_Court_Palace).[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unknown_Warrior#cite_note-Hanson-1) The casket was banded with iron, and a medieval crusader's sword chosen by [King George V](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_V) personally from the Royal Collection was affixed to the top and surmounted by an iron shield bearing the inscription 'A British Warrior who fell in the Great War 1914–1918 for King and Country'.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unknown_Warrior#cite_note-Hanson-1)

The casket was then placed onto a French military wagon, drawn by six black horses.and a mile-long procession—led by one thousand local schoolchildren, escorted by a division of French troops—made its way down to the harbour to sail to Dover where it was sent to London.

On the morning of 11 November 1920, the casket was placed onto a gun carriage of the [Royal Horse Artillery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Horse_Artillery) and drawn by six horses through immense and silent crowds.. The cortège was then followed by [The King](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_V), the [Royal Family](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Royal_Family) and ministers of state to Westminster Abbey, where the casket was borne into the West Nave of the Abbey flanked by a guard of honour of one hundred recipients of the [Victoria Cross](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victoria_Cross).

The guests of honour were a group of about one hundred women.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unknown_Warrior#cite_note-Hanson-1) They had been chosen because they had each lost their husband and all their sons in the war.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unknown_Warrior#cite_note-Hanson-1) "Every woman so bereft who applied for a place got it".[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unknown_Warrior#cite_note-Hanson-1)

The coffin was then interred in the far western end of the Nave, only a few feet from the entrance, in soil brought from each of the main battlefields, and covered with a silk pall. Servicemen from the armed forces stood guard as tens of thousands of mourners filed silently past. The ceremony appears to have served as a form of catharsis for collective mourning on a scale not previously known.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unknown_Warrior#cite_note-Hanson-1)

The grave was then capped with a black Belgian marble stone (the only [tombstone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tombstone) in the Abbey on which it is forbidden to walk) featuring this inscription, composed by [Herbert Edward Ryle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Edward_Ryle), Dean of Westminster, engraved with brass from melted down wartime ammunition.

Beneath this stone rests the body  
Of a British warrior  
Unknown by name or rank  
Brought from France to lie among  
The most illustrious of the land  
And buried here on Armistice Day  
11 Nov: 1920, in the presence of  
His Majesty King George V  
His Ministers of State  
The Chiefs of his forces  
And a vast concourse of the nation

Thus are commemorated the many  
Multitudes who during the Great  
War of 1914 – 1918 gave the most that  
Man can give life itself  
For God  
For King and country  
For loved ones home and empire  
For the sacred cause of justice and  
The freedom of the world

They buried him among the kings because he  
Had done good toward God and toward  
His house

Around the main inscription are four [New Testament](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Testament) quotations:

The Lord knoweth them that are his (top; [2 Timothy 2:19](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_(King_James)/2_Timothy#2:19))  
Unknown and yet well known, dying and behold we live (side; [2 Corinthians 6:9](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_(King_James)/2_Corinthians#6:9))  
Greater love hath no man than this (side; [John 15:13](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_(King_James)/John#15:13))  
In Christ shall all be made alive (base; [1 Corinthians 15:22](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_(King_James)/1_Corinthians#15:22))

Sunday 8 November is Remembrance Sunday, when we remember those who have died in the service of Britain and the Commonwealth. We also reflect on the cost of war and the price of freedom. The death and grief, bitterness and fera it leaves behind. This year has also seen the 75th anniversary of VE Day and VJ Day, events that were marked in a more subdued way because of the pandemic.

Death and grief are an unavoidable part of being human, just as much today as when Paul wrote his letter to the Thessalonians.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Sure enough, we do not need to look far to find cause to grieve and mourn in recent days:

In Vienna, four people were shot dead in what seems to have been a terrorist attack. It comes barely a week after the knife attacks at a church in Nice that left three people dead.

A powerful earthquake in the Aegean Sea killed at least 27 people in Turkey.

The death toll from the coronavirus pandemic continues to climb daily.

As well as those facing recent bereavements from coronavirus or other causes, others may be mourning the loss of jobs, freedoms, social contact and the sense of a ‘normal’ life as England enters a second lockdown.

In the midst of such depths of pain and suffering, how should we, in Christ, respond?

Rather than become lost forever in fear, bitterness and despair, Paul wishes ‘that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope’ (1 Thessalonians 4.13).

With Jesus’ death and resurrection comes the hope that ‘through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died’ (1 Thessalonians 4.14) and ‘we will be with the Lord for ever.’ (1 Thessalonians 4.17). Paul paints a picture of this hope in triumphant terms, delivered ‘with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet’ (1 Thessalonians 4.16).

The scriptures loudly proclaim God’s love is stronger than death and this is the hope to which we can hold.

What do we believe about death? This is one of those big questions of life. We probably come back to it at different times in our lives – with changing answers! We know that no one has a complete understanding. We find it a difficult subject to think or talk about. And our language reflects this: we use lots of euphemisms for death – ‘passed on’, ‘lost’. [Death Cafes](https://deathcafe.com/) and the [Dying Matters](https://www.dyingmatters.org/) movement try to encourage people to explore what people believe about death.

Paul and his companions do not go into forensic detail about the subject, but they do affirm, very strongly, that we can look forward to being with God after death. Why? Because Jesus died and rose again and those who are in Christ will likewise follow him in death and resurrection.

What about those who are not in Christ? What about those who have ignored God or even rejected God all their lives. Will God ignore and reject them after death? Well the Bible says mixed things about that to be honest. What scripture is clear about is the encouragement to seek the Lord whilst he may be found? Seek the Lord now.

Tom Holland is a well-respected historian, especially of the classical world of Rome, Greece and Persia. He recently wrote the bestselling *Dominion: The making of the western mind* (Little Brown, 2019), a history of Christianity, in an attempt to get to the bottom of how that faith has transformed the way everyone in the west thinks and acts. In the process, he found himself changed.

Speaking to the URC’s Reform magazine[[3]](#endnote-3), he said that what intrigued him about Paul’s writings is that Paul assumes everyone knows the story of Jesus and his letters explore the implications of this and their power is that Paul is thinking aloud wrestling with the issues of the significance of the resurrection. But he wouldn’t be wrestling with these issues unless he takes for granted the truth of the fact that Jesus died on the cross and in some way is a part of God.

He confessed that over his teenage years faith was like a dimmer switch slowly going down. But he realised in writing Dominion that values that he instinctively held quite strongly – like human rights and human life having an inherent value – have no underpinning except from this kind of faith. He realised how rich, intellectually and spiritually the engagement of Christians have been. And at the back of it all was the biblical arc, particularly the story contained in the gospels.

The Tolkien quote, that a myth can be true, was what cut the Gordian knot for him. Even as a literary figure, Jesus seems to me miraculous, he said. In the miracle of the story I can rest what I believe on the richness of mythic resonance of the story and of everything that has flowed from the story. I believe in the story and I feel myself part of the story, and that gives me a kind of happiness that I hadn’t had before.

Paul uses apocalyptic language to describe the second coming (see vv.16-17). It is powerful language, using the sounds and imagery of contemporary imperial ceremonies that would have been familiar to the Thessalonians. A modern equivalent may be the opening of an event such as the Olympic Games? Does such language and imagery help us to understand and anticipate our journey to heaven? Or does it all seem rather strange to us today?

[Alison McQueen](https://www.futurity.org/apocalyptic-language-politics-1645182)[[4]](#endnote-4) has written about how apocalyptic language is widely used in public politics – e.g. in times of conflict, or in connection with the concerns of climate change activists and groups – but warns against letting ‘good vs evil’ language cloud our vision of what ‘good’ truly looks like. McQueen’s research suggests that when people see themselves as engaged in a classic “good vs. evil” struggle, they are more likely to justify the use of terrible means, including war, torture, genocide, and nuclear annihilation, all to achieve desired ends. The US Election saw President Trump attempting to circumvent democracy by claiming the election was a fraud, it was good v evil, without any evidence for his case.

The language here describes how Romans citizens would go out to meet the emperor when he pays them a state visit and then accompanies them back to the city itself: heaven comes to earth in other words. Which is the tremendous promise of the last verse:

We will be with the Lord.

I have shared many times the comfort I received through the painful circumstances of my father’s death. I had just become a minister a few months earlier when my dad died on October 31st, 1995. He died of pneumonia, the gentleman’s disease as they call it. I got a call from the hospital that he was dying. I turned to prayer and in my distress the words ‘safe in my hands’ came to me. We dashed off to the hospital in time for my dad’s dying words. The last words he said to me was ‘I’m safe in God’s hands’.

We will be with the Lord.

Whether it’s the loss of war: the unknown soldier but someone’s son, daughter, wife, husband; the pain of death in this hard social distanced pandemic: we are not without hope, as Paul encourages us.

We will be with the Lord.

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\_Unknown\_Warrior [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/110-november-december-2020-ab/proper-27/postscript [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.reform-magazine.co.uk/2020/10/interview-tom-holland-story-that-changed-everything/ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.futurity.org/apocalyptic-language-politics-1645182/ [↑](#endnote-ref-4)