

## A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

### Remembrance Day 2018

Poppies, poppies everywhere. I wonder, if you look round the church, how many you can see – the paper ones with plastic stalks, and leaves which this year have the leaves overprinted with the dates 1918 and 2018, metal brooch poppies, knitted or crochet ones, which people have made themselves, the fabric ones on wreaths and crosses, and in our porch, the very effective plastic ones which pupils from the Infants' School have made from the bases of plastic bottles, ....

All over the country, in cascades pouring over buildings, planted in gardens of remembrance, floating from the ceiling of the Albert Hall, and down into the Atrium of the Lloyds building in the City of London, on the radiators of cars, and even dangling from dogs' collars...in many, many places and forms, there are poppies at this time of year.

When I was a very little girl – too little to be going to school in the afternoon – I was taken to see remembrance poppies being made in the British Legion factory in my home town. Really, I should say, I just tagged along on the trip, because my mother belonged to a women's group which was taking the tour, and she couldn't find anyone else to look after me. But, though I was there 'accidentally', so to speak, I still remember seeing the big machines cutting out the poppy flowers (all made in silky fabric in those days), and pressing out the black centres to go in the centre of them. And all the machines were being operated by men who were disabled – some with legs missing, some with only one arm, others who were blind.

Even back then, though I was very young, I must have been told that these were people who'd been injured in the first and second world wars (and because it was a long time ago, quite a lot of them still would have been veterans off the First World War!)

These disabled men were a very normal part of my childhood, because many of them lived in a grand hospital or home, which had been built in 1924, opposite the top of our road, and some of them were pushed down in wheelchairs to the church I went to on Sundays. I'm only sorry I wasn't old enough to talk to these men personally, and hear their stories. I just saw them in their wheelchairs, and on that trip to the poppy factory.

'We will remember them'. This year, we're trying to get a more personal feel for the people from Linton who died in the two world wars, by hearing their Christian names, when the list is read from the War Memorial, and the age at which each one died. I imagine this will deepen for us all a sense of the tragedy of their loss.

But why *poppies* to remember them? It all started with a doctor in the Canadian army, John McCrae, who, when burying a comrade after a battle in 1915, noticed the poppies pushing up through the disturbed earth, and wrote a poem:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

So, the poppies take us back to that part of France and Belgium, and remind us of the horrific number of casualties in the first mechanized war in history. And we buy them to support the victims of the many wars there have been since then, and we shall also be taking a collection for the Poppy appeal at the end of the service today.

But what else do poppies make us think of? I think their colours are the true colours of this day – not the blue or khaki of service uniforms, though obviously, members of the armed services and the cadets observe this day very seriously; not the red white and blue of the Union Jack, although it's brought into church as a kind of prayer that our nation might serve God; no – to me, the *black red and green* of a poppy say the most about the meaning of today. The blackness at the centre speaks of the darkness in our hearts which causes war: the fear and hatred of people different from ourselves, the desire for power, and the greed which makes governments and peoples turn to violence; the cruelty which devises ever more devastating ways of killing, hurting and maiming people and destroying the world around us. All this comes from a power of darkness in our hearts, which we can call 'sin'.

And, then, of course, the red of the petals speaks of the blood and pain which war creates. We still hear on our news of war's pain and grief going on in the world today, - in the Yemen, in Syria, in South Sudan and Congo - and are rightly appalled.

Sometimes a nation believes it has to enter into war to defend a just cause or conquer an evil enemy; but despite

the high-hearted valour with which people may approach this call – as many did at the beginning of the First World War – and the truly extraordinary acts of heroism, particularly in defence of comrades, which people exercise in combat, we nevertheless know very well that war isn't a romantic adventure, but something truly horrible, even if we think it's necessary. So, red stands for blood and pain.

But finally, there's the green in the poppy – green, a natural symbol of life and growing hope. And when we solemnly remember wars and all their tragic consequences, we pledge ourselves, on an occasion like this, to the service of life: to reconciliation, freedom, peace, justice, and the healing of wounds in people's lives, and in our ravaged earth.

Black red and green – the colours of the poppy. For Christians they have a particularly deep meaning: Christianity is very realistic about human sin and destructiveness; we confess its effects in our own lives nearly every time we come to a church service. But the colour red speaks to us of the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son - blood shed in pain on the cross to take upon himself our evil, and overcome its effects; to bring forgiveness, peace and hope. And finally, the green of life speaks to us a deeper power than our own, which can fulfil the good intentions we express with our lips – the power of God working within us to bring transformation and hope, where before there was despair and hopelessness.

Poppies, poppies everywhere.... Look around. These little flowers can mean so much.