**R e m e m b r a n c e**
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 (Sermon preached at St Mary's Church on 11th November 2018)**

A long time ago a man sensed a calling to leave his home and country and begin a journey to a new place where life would be good and peaceful and all would know Godly blessing. That man was called Abraham because he would become ‘the father of many nations’. We find his story in the early part of the Bible, and 3 of the major world faiths trace their origins back to him. In Genesis Ch.12 we read that in response to this first encounter with God, he built a stone altar. His was a journey of trust – he did not live to see its fulfilment.

In 1914 as our nation was being mobilised for a great armed conflict young men sensed a call to leave home and country and begin a journey which, for many, took them to the battle front and the trenches of Northern France and Flanders. I am told that platoons formed up in Wirksworth and surrounding villages such as Middleton and they marched off towards Cromford where a larger group was assembled. Ultimately they became part of the allied forces together with those from France, Russia and other parts of the world showing allegiance to this cause.
It was a journey into the unknown, into a form of warfare never experienced before, but one undertaken willingly in the expectation that lasting peace would ensue. Many of our local volunteers would not live to see this fulfilment as this conflict claimed millions of lives.

On 4 August 1914  King George V wrote in his diary, "I held a council at 10.45 to declare war with Germany. It is a terrible catastrophe... Please to God it may soon be over." That day came more than 4 years later on 11 November 1918.
As our nation began to count the cost, the fallen were honoured by cenotaphs, memorial buildings and gardens in our cities, towns and villages, and most poignantly by vast cemeteries situated in the former battlefields, each grave marked by a  simple headstone -more than 120,000 of which were made from Hopton Wood stone and engraved locally.And so began another journey from Middleton and Wirksworth to France & Belgium, part of which has been re-enacted today. Each stone representing life lost, that life might be lived.  As we heard in the words of Jesus Christ, speaking of himself:‘no-one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’  (John 15:13) and in the immortal words of the Kohima Epitaph spoken on behalf of the fallen: ‘for your tomorrow we gave our today’

And what of that tomorrow? – we have now had 100 years of it, and it has been quite a journey.  During the following decade, hopes of a new way of being found expression in Women’s suffrage; the Labour movement and Trades Unions; and the foundations of our consumer society were laid.  On the world stage, The League of Nations was formed, its principle mission to maintain world peace.A noble ideal, but as we know, just a generation later the shadow of world war was to fall over us once again. This Second World War unleashed a conflict of unprecedented scale, with its impact increasingly felt by civilian non-combatants. Again the aftermath brought vast social changes that continue to influence us to this day.

The continued desire to work towards ‘world peace’ by multilateral co-operation was taken up by the newly formed United Nations in 1945, and before its headquarters in New York a sculpture is found which draws inspiration from another of our readings:‘they shall beat their swords in to ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more’ (Isaiah 2:4)

This day has not arrived… yet. But my generation has never known the large scale conflict of earlier times. We have been enabled to go about our lives mostly without fear of war visiting us, though we are only too conscious of the impact of warfare upon those who have served elsewhere on our behalf, together with those close to them, and those whose struggles of body, mind and spirit continue.

As indeed we are conscious of the valued role of our armed forces in humanitarian action: whether it be peace-keeping duties with the UN, delivering humanitarian aid by air or rescuing migrants at sea.  And it is recognised that all this is possible because of a readiness for action maintained by those whose role is the defence of our nation, often working in partnership with those of other like-minded nations. It is no accident that the historic battlefields of Europe have not been fought over again and for this we are thankful.

This is a letter received from the Mayor of Die:

Dear Twinned Friends,
On the occasion of the Armistice centenary, we recall the sufferings shared during this conflict by soldiers of our towns, Wirksworth and Die, who fought side by side, but also those of Frankenau, all committed to this fratricidal war.
It is also an opportunity to remind that Die took care of many war wounded, both in its town hospital and in the British military hospital of the Martouret area. Exactly one century ago, the Englishmen from Matouret gave the inhabitants of Die a flag – the Union Jack, as a keepsake of the welcome that they received: this flag is still in the museum of Die.
That is why I wanted to associate the celebration of this budding friendship that did not waiver during the Second World War and grew stronger thanks to our twinning.
With the commemoration of the centenary of the 11th November 1918, this friendship, stronger than any political or economic incident, is destined for lasting and I am delighted at it.
Gilbert Tremolet

So our journey brings us to this day and we place a memorial stone within our community. Do take a close look when you get the chance. It is engraved with these words: ‘Erected for the people of Wirksworth on 11 November 2018. To commemorate the centenary of the end of the First World War. We remember the loss and suffering of our people at that time.'

Stone has such enduring qualities. We have not forgotten the cost and future generations will be reminded to value their freedom and use it well. While waiting in the Memorial Gardens on 9th November we saw children from our infant schools visiting this special place, in preparation for today. Looking at them aged 4-7, I wondered how they might connect with the events of 100 years ago and was also struck by a deep desire that their journey through life may be one marked by peace. A peace that is possible because of what those who have gone before have done with their lives, and what they, in turn, will be inspired to do with theirs.
Like Abraham’s altar, this stone evokes a profound sense of thankfulness and of future hope. My prayer is that through its presence in our community we may encounter the God of peace and know something of our hopes and prayers for peace fulfilled in this world.

With blessings
Kevin