Reflection by Sarah Nichols

Remembrance Sunday
John 15 v 13
10 November 2024

The term 'thankful villages' was used to describe those villages who did not lose any of the men who left to fight in the First World War and 'doubly thankful' if they lost no-one during the Second World War as well. There are probably very few doubly thankful villages in the country and sadly I note there are no thankful villages at all in Devon. Every single village experienced a death. The horrors of war affected everyone in every family up and down the country.

My own family could perhaps be thought of as thankful. My grandad Joe fought in Flanders during WW1. Both he and his brothers escaped physically uninjured. Sadly, the same was not true in WW2. My dad's cousin served in the Navy and one day volunteered to sort out a problem with the ship's boiler. A terrible accidental explosion occurred, and he was killed instantly. Two other cousins (brothers) died in military service. Their brother stayed on in Germany after the war, marrying a German woman but he became unwell with appendicitis. Germany was in such disarray he was not able to source proper medical assistance and died. An indirect victim of the conflict and robbing his parents of all their children.

As a child I was fascinated by three names who were mentioned on a plaque in our church, but did not know the back story of the individuals. One day an older member of the congregation called Les filled us in. All three had been young men who attended the Christian youth group: Donald Mobbs was in the Air Force, an intelligent and articulate individual: Terence Jones was not known to Les so he couldn't tell us any information about him. The third man was called Harry Hubbard. Harry was in the army despite being deaf, he was a humble, quiet soul and the Les' brother. Society was robbed of Donald's potential; Les was robbed of his brother and countless unknown individuals made the ultimate sacrifice. How important it is to honour all those who have died serving their country during war and in more recent conflicts since.

A few years ago, I noticed on the wall of Winner Street Baptist church in Paignton there is a memorial plaque which unusually listed a woman – Doris Powell – who died in WW2. I have tried to find out more information about Doris but sadly have been unable to find out anything about how she died or how she was involved in military service. For me she represents those countless individuals who ultimately preserved our nation and our freedoms. No doubt many of you will know those who have served in the Forces; some receiving life-changing injuries or the hidden distress of post-traumatic stress disorder. An old work colleague of mine always checked under her car before getting in. Her husband had been posted in Northern Ireland during the early 1980s and it was so engrained in her to check there were no explosives planted underneath. The tentacles of conflict have a long reach.

Great themes of remembering, sacrifice and love are woven throughout the bible and the gospel story. Sin is a great destroyer of human dignity and potential in the same way as war. Ultimately war is a by-product of our walking away from God. We remember those who fought for freedom, which perhaps is an abstract concept to some of us who have not experienced conflict as older people have. In the same way we recognise that Christ died to save the world. This is truth but when this is expressed and understood on a personal level the truth becomes a vivid reality. Similarly, the true stories of men and women who died and suffered bring home the horror of war and the reality of personal sacrifice.

As we remember this weekend, let us keep in mind the words of John 15 v 13: '***Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends'.*** I am reminded of the words of an old hymn *'Jesus died for all mankind, and Jesus died for me'.*