

Armistice Day Service  
11 November 2007  
Sermon by the Reverend Stephen T. Ayres

Good morning and welcome, particularly to our British friends who join us today in remembering all those who have given their lives in the service of our respective countries. We also remember today, two beloved members of the British Officer's Club who have died in the past year, Jeremy Wales and Tony Carrigan. I know that Tony is watching over each one of us to make sure we conduct this service with the combination of precision and good humor for which he was so loved. It was my great privilege to know both Tony and Jeremy, and I dedicate this sermon on memory and resurrection to their memory.

How should we as Christians remember our brothers and sisters who have given their lives to defend our nations? Today we remember through poetry, scripture, music, poppies, and prayer. But each poem and each scripture reading shapes our memories in subtly different ways, so let us take the time to explore how each speaks to our memories of the dead so that we might discern how God remembers us and wants us to remember our fallen brothers and sister.

We began this service with John McRae's stirring poem *In Flanders Field* with the powerful, haunting image of blood red poppies blowing through the fresh crosses on a Flemish battlefield. These co-mingled images of red flowers, white crosses and larks singing in the heavens remind us of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, and make this one of the three best known poems from World War One.

But the last stanza is more time-bound, and more troubling. We move from the image of death and resurrection to a call to continue the fight, "Take up our quarrel with the foe:" Death, in McRae's poem, has not ended the will to fight on. McRae's poem was written in 1914, early in the First World War, and reflects the bravado of a nation committed to victory. Compare his assurance with another well known poem from World War One, Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum est*, written in 1917, after the war had bogged down into excruciatingly gruesome trench warfare. After describing the panic of a poison gas attack, Owen rips into Horace's ancient ode, declaring:

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.\*](#)

Both McRae and Owen are commemorating a war in which they served on the front lines, but their memories are starkly different. Both are politicised memories. Both draw our attention from remembering the dead to arguing about war with the living.

I prefer the memory embodied in the lament so ably played on the bagpipe this morning. "Flowers of the Forest" is a Scottish tune about the Battle of Flodden Field, fought between British and Scottish armies in 1513. British forces triumphed, killing

King James the IV and 10,000 Scotsmen. In the "Flowers of the Forest" milkmaids lament their loss: (pardon my Scottish)

I've heard the lilting, at the yowe-milking,  
Lassies a-lilting before dawn o' day;  
but now they are moaning on ilka green loaning;  
"The Flowers of the Forest are a' wede away".

In this song, milkmaids, symbols of nourishment and fertility, lament the loss of a generation of Scotland's young men, the flowers of the forest wasted away. The memory of loss is not only of those who died on the battlefield, but of those left behind, of the lassies lilting and moaning.

I would vote for Laurence Binyon's *For the Fallen* as the best of the well known WWI poems. Written in 1914, it says little about the war, but focuses on those who have died, alternating between mourning their death and hoping for a better life in the age to come

### **For The Fallen**

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 condemn.  
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.

We will remember them, that to the end, to the end, they will remain. But we too will become memories and who will remember us remembering those who have gone before? Jesus' debate with the Sadducees in today's gospel reminds us of the power of God's eternal memory.

The Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection and only accepted the first five books of the Hebrew Bible as scripture asked Jesus a trick question. The book of Leviticus required the next of kin to marry a widow to preserve the family lineage, and to insure that widows were cared for. The Sadducees created a silly hypothetical out of this law to argue against resurrection. Their point was how could resurrection, a concept that developed late in Jewish tradition – around the time of the Macabees, some 200 years before Jesus, violate an ancient law found in the heart of scripture.

Jesus responded to the question with a novel interpretation of another passage from the heart of scripture, the story of Moses and the burning bush. In the story of the burning "bush", Moses asks God who he is. God tells Moses to remember his ancestors: "I am the God of Abraham ...". Because God says *is* (not *was*), Abraham is alive now, alive in God's memory. God's loving relationship with Abraham is not just a thing of the past, but is living within god's eternal presence. Such is the power of god's love and god's memory.

Each of us is loved by God and will be held in love in God's eternal memory. As we promise in Binyon's poem that "We will remember them" we know that God promises to remember us.

Jesus takes the promise of resurrection in God's memory one step further. There will be no marriage in heaven and we will be like angels, thought to be genderless in Jesus time. Our concerns about carrying on the family lineage are irrelevant after death. So too will our concerns about defending national borders and pride. Soldiers, friend or foe, will be remembered by God, not for their profession on earth, but for being God's children, God's beloved.

As we remember our fallen brothers and sisters today, let us remember them as Jesus would have us remember them. They are beyond the grief we know in this life, they are like angels, they are children of God. Or as Laurence Binyon says they are like stars:

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.

To the end may we all remain in God's love.