

Remembrance Service 2019

'I saw for the first and not the last time how low men can get. There were fights going on around every can of food, arguing everywhere until most of the water was spilt. I was nearly 'out' myself and then I had the first experience of HIS WINGS. Rations, such as they were had been issued - half the men, including myself getting none, and I was walking to a rock to sit down, and came across a can of tomatoes – open and nearly full- beside the rock. How it came to be there, I know not, but it definitely saved me that day and from that moment I have trusted that God would see me through, and although at times conditions are terrible, HE has seen fit to keep me well.'

.....Words taken from a letter written to his wife during the Second World War by Ken Wakefield, a Sussex man, the father of one of my former parishioners. This section of the letter described how desperate the prisoners of war in his situation became, held as they were in a barbed wire compound, with no food or drink in the blazing sun. War is a terrible thing.

Ken worked in radar in the RAF and was taken prisoner at Tobruk in Libya after the German capture of this strategic port after a siege. He was one of seven volunteers to keep the radar and radio station going as long as possible, and he gives a vivid account of the way in which he was captured, when he says, 'the night was turned to day by the blowing up of petrol and ammunition dumps and lorries in and around the town.' Subsequently, he was held as a prisoner of war in Italy and then in Germany where just before the war ended he was forced to help clear up a camp which had held Russian prisoners of war, after the men there had been led off on a death march. Like most of the troops involved in such conflict, he rarely spoke about the things he had experienced.

Ken Wakefield's letter provides us with a snapshot of one single person's experience of war. We have heard the list of names of those from our parish who did not return from either war, and this is quite apart from those who served and returned. Each had a life story to tell – sometimes unspoken, yet always live out. When we remember those who served, we should also never forget their families and the ways in which they were also affected.

What is moving is Ken's strong sense that God was with him throughout. He tells us, you will remember, that it was at the moment of absolute abandonment, when all seemed hopeless to him that he says he experienced the sense of God's wings – in other words, the presence of God supporting him at his most desperate hour. It is a remarkable image and comes from the Bible. The Psalms, the ancient collection of hymns of the Jewish people, cover every facet of human life, and Psalm 17 (v.8) is a hymn-prayer asks for deliverance from persecution as the writer implores God to: '*Guard me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.*' It conjures up thoughts of warmth and security. Jesus uses such imagery when he gazes over Jerusalem on his journey towards revealing the fulness of God's Love for each of us through death and resurrection and says, '*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*' (Luke 13: 34) – A lament of absolute love.

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the start of the Second World War, just twenty-one years after the Great War as well as the 75th anniversary of many events which started to bring the conflict to an end. Unlike the vast losses of those serving in the armed forces of those nations involved in the First War, it was civilians who perished in numbers beyond our comprehension in the Second. One of the most moving books I possess is Roman Vishniac's, 'A Vanished World,' a collection of photographs he took of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe in the late thirties and early forties. There are heart-breaking photos of peasant families living everyday lives, old pedlars selling their wares, young boys in yeshivas learning Torah, children playing on a street, a distressed couple walking along in anxiety because their livelihood has been taken away from them by the Nazis. All swept away. The murder of millions of Jewish men, women and children in Europe is something Western Society should never forget. Likewise, the massacre of tens of millions of Chinese, Russians, Poles and others. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki then seemed to be the only way to bring the war to an end wrought through the horror of mass destruction, although, thank God, the world has thus far never resorted to such warfare again.

Since then, however, numerous conflicts have continued to ravage the lives of the innocent; from Korea, Vietnam, the Balkans, Iraq, the Falklands, Afghanistan and the Northern Irish Troubles together with the ongoing fight against radical Islamism. The brave men and women of our armed forces have been present in many of these theatres of war or discord, seeking to make a difference – being prepared to serve their queen and country by literally putting their lives on the line in the cause of freedom. We should never forget such commitment and duty.

Beyond acknowledging those who gave their lives for freedom and honouring those who serve in order to seek to enable us to live in peace, what else should we take away from this annual remembrance?

It seems to me that the greatest gift we can give to the world is to heed the words of Jesus, who calls us to abide in peace. This peace is founded on the knowledge of God's Love which exists at the heart of creation and dwells in every human heart. This love is made known to us within our humanity in the face of Jesus Christ who walked the same earthly journey as each of us, and through giving himself on the cross, draws us to the knowledge of the fulness of Resurrection Life. Living this life offers each of us, in our own way, the possibility of transforming the world through seeking to display love to all those we meet. Jesus issues one command: to love one another. In this is the fulness of life, where we seek not to put ourselves at the centre of our own world, but to find complete joy in serving those we meet. It is not always an easy journey, but one where even the smallest gesture, act or word can transform other people's lives.

It is a personal choice; yet displaying this call to love also changes the world. It offers us contentment and well as our own constant transformation. Jesus looked over Jerusalem and wept, yet tenderly offered the image of enfolding love. He offers to journey with each of us in our journey so that we too may know the balm of his presence which Ken Wakefield experienced in that prison camp.

Jesus says to you and me as he did to his friends 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.'

We can do no greater thing within our lives.



John 15: 12-17

Jesus said, "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.

If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

You are my friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from my Father I have made known to you.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. These things I command you - that you love one another.