

A Remembrance Day story of compassion

***O God our help in ages past, our help for years to come,
our shelter in the stormy blast and our eternal home.***

***And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and
take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.***

John 14 v 3



Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. John 15 v 13

He was very old now, but could still hold himself stiffly at attention before the monument. Very few could remember, first-hand, the savageness of the ordeal that had sent millions of young men to their deaths- the cream of the generation almost wiped out. He was haunted by the faces of the boys he'd had to order into battle, the ones who'd never come back. Yet one nameless man was able to bring a measure of comfort to his tormented mind. At the sound of the gun signaling the eleventh hour he was mentally transported back to the fields of Flanders.

The battle had raged for over two hours, with neither side gaining any advantage. Wave after wave of soldiers had been dispatched from the muddy trenches and sent over the top. So many had died already that day that he decided he could not afford to lose any more men before reinforcements arrived. There came a slight lull in the battle due to the sheer exhaustion of the men on both sides.

A young soldier came up to him requesting that he be allowed to go over the top. He looked at the boy who couldn't have been more than nineteen. Was this extreme bravery in the face of the enemy or was the soldier so scared he just needed to get it over with?

"Why would you want to throw your life away soldier? It's almost certain death to go out there."

"My best friend went out over an hour ago, captain, and he hasn't come back. I know my friend must be hurt and calling for me. I must go to him, sir, I must." There were tears in the boy's eyes.

"Soldier, I'm sorry, but your friend is probably dead. What purpose would it serve to let you sacrifice your life too?"

"At least I'd know I'd tried, sir, he'd do the same thing in my shoes. I know he would."

The impact of his words softened his heart. He remembered the awful pain he'd felt himself when his brother had died. He'd never had the chance to say goodbye. "All right soldier, you can go."

Despite the horror all around them, he saw a radiant smile on the boy's face, as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "God bless you, sir," said the soldier.

It was a long time before the guns fell silent for the last time and each side was allowed to gather their dead and wounded. The captain remembered the young soldier. He looked through the many piles of bodies. Young men. When he came to the makeshift hospital, he looked carefully through the casualties. He soon found himself before the prone body of the soldier, alive, but severely wounded. He knelt down beside the young man and gently laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, son. I knew I was wrong to let you go."

"Oh no, sir. I'm glad you did and I'm glad you're here now so I can thank you. You see sir, I found my friend. He was badly wounded, but I was able to comfort him at the end. As I held him dying in my arms, he looked me in the eyes and said: "I knew you'd come."

The young soldier faded between consciousness and oblivion for some time before he finally slipped away. The captain stayed by his side until the end, tears streaming quietly down his cheeks. As the bugle sounded, the old captain envisioned once again the young soldier's face. Looking up, he could almost hear the stone monument calling out to him: "I knew you'd come."

Anon.

HYMN REFLECTION by MS

It is high time we had a hymn by Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith, one-time Bishop of Thetford, but who lived, until last year, at Ford, down the road. Now, at the age of 94, he has moved to be near his son in Cambridge. He has written hundreds of hymns, including some very well known ones (*Lord, for the years*). He wrote the hymn below specially for Remembrance Sunday.

As we said last week, it is a good idea sometimes to put aside some of the old hackneyed stuff for a while and think anew. *I vow to thee my country* is too high for many people to sing comfortably; *O God our help in ages past* is never sung as it was written, and should be; *O valiant hearts* - well, some love it, some will not have it at any price. It is not in the New A & M. So let's turn to a hymn by a master, set to a very beautiful and appropriate tune. Like last week's "All Saints" hymn, Bishop Timothy's words are comprehensible for everybody over about ten. It is so good to begin with a phrase from the Communion service, and end with Mother Julian's phrase, "All shall be well." Julian herself always wrote in a simple, straightforward style.

Verse 2 says:

We bring our hurt, our loneliness and loss, to Him who hung forsaken on the Cross.

And that provides the perfect link to the beautiful tune, which many of us will have sung to the hymn beginning, "And now, O Father, mindful of the love that bought us once for all on Calvary's tree." This tune, *Unde et memores*, is by W.H.Monk, who was the Music Editor of the original A & M in 1861. It is usually played in the key of E Flat nowadays. When I first learnt it, some 75 years ago, it was printed in D Flat, which makes all the difference in the world. E Flat sounds strong and confident; D Flat sounds like velvet. This is one of those tiny details which imparts perfection; unrecognised by most churchgoers, but **felt** by almost everybody.

Eternal God, before whose face we stand,
your earthly children, fashioned by your hand,
hear and behold us, for to you alone
all hearts are open, all our longings known:
so for our world and for ourselves we pray
the gift of peace, O Lord, in this our day.

We come with grief, with thankfulness and pride,
to hold in honour those who served and died;
we bring our hurt, our loneliness and loss,
to Him who hung forsaken on the Cross;
who, for our peace, our pains and sorrows bore,
and with the Father lives for evermore.

O Prince of Peace, who gave for us your life,
look down in pity on our sin and strife.
May this remembrance move our hearts to build
a peace enduring, and a hope fulfilled,
when every flag of tyranny is furled
and wars at last shall cease in all the world.

From earth's long tale of suffering here below
we pray the fragile flower of peace may grow,
till cloud and darkness vanish from our skies
to see the Sun of Righteousness arise.
When night is past, and peace shall banish pain,
all shall be well, in God's eternal reign.

To remember is
to pray for peace,
to work for peace,
to live peace.
anon

Psalm 121

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

John 14:27

The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

James 3:17-18