Remembrance Sunday 2026

Last year at the Tower of London 130,000 ceramic poppies were planted in the surrounding gardens. It was in memory of British and Commonwealth soldiers who lost their lives in the final 100 days of WW1. It was reminiscent of the 888,246 poppies made in 2014 in the exhibition entitled *'Blood swept lands and seas of red'* (pic on bulletin). Each poppy represented a British or Colonial servicemen killed in the First World War. What is it about poppies and that moves us?

In the winter of 1915 Colonel John McRae, a Canadian medical officer, was tending to some of the appalling casualties at the second battle of Ypres. He wrote a poem that was sent anonymously to the Punch magazine in London. They printed it on December 8th and many of you will recognise it:

In Flanders fields the poppies grow between the crosses, row on row, that mark our place: and in the sky the larks, still bravely singing fly, scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago, we lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, Loved, and were loved, and now we lie in Flanders fields.

In the summer of 1917, the war artist William Orpen visited the battlefields and saw something very different. He wrote, *'No words can express the beauty of it. The dreary dismal mud was baked white and pure-dazzling white. White daisies, red poppies and blue flowers (probably cornflowers), great masses of them, stretched for miles. The sky a pure dark blue, and the whole air up to a height of 40' thick with white butterflies. It was like an enchanted land, but instead of fairies there were 1000's of little white crosses marked "unknown British soldier."*

The poem Flanders fields and the visual imagery so moved Moina Michael, a YMCA worker in the US, that she vowed to wear a poppy evermore. In 1921 when the British Legion was formed, a friend of hers approached them with samples of artificial poppies that Moina had made. They responded immediately and Poppy day was born. That year more than £100,000 was raised.

Ironically after WW2 we nearly killed poppies off with the use of pesticides, but thankfully the set aside policy in the 1980's enabled their return. Poppy seeds can lie dormant for over 40 years (some say even more) and each flower can have over 17,000 seeds so they have an astonishing power to rejuvenate.

In our gospel reading, the ten bridesmaids are waiting through the darkness for the bridegroom to arrive. They are waiting with their lamps, keeping a light burning. Jesus tells them they must be ready and not allow their lights to go out. By Remembrance Sunday, we too keep a light burning. We remember those whose lives were cut short and gave so much. But Christian remembrance is never simply about looking backwards. We remember because we believe that the darkness of war and death will not have the last word. Our remembrance is also about looking forwards. We look forward to the coming of God's Kingdom, when the light of Christ will shine like no other.

And here perhaps a clue as to why the poppy is such a powerful symbol. Yes, of course, it represents shed blood and the dreadful deaths of so many. They signify transience and vulnerability as Europe's younger generation was slaughtered in the horrors of war. But they can point us too to the blood red wounds of Christ himself. They speak of God's love and solidarity with suffering.

And more than that they also speak of new life and beauty. They can transform and heal a devastated landscape. They speak of the living God about whom St Paul writes in our second reading; who can take the seeds of suffering and bring new life and resurrection. The God who can bring new hope and new life from the midst of unimaginable evil.

The silence we will share this afternoon at our war memorial begins with the Last Post - we look back and remember the deaths and sacrifice made by so many. It ends with the Reveille and its call to a new dawn of life and resurrection. The humble poppy symbolizes the same transition. May they be for us symbols that take us to the heart of our faith in the Living God who in Christ overcomes death and brings resurrection.