**Remembrance Sunday 2014 Dursley Civic Service**

**Matthew 25.1-13 Amos 5. 18-24**

This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. War was declared on 4th August 1914

On that day, the Dursley Gazette front page said ‘everybody keep calm, continue your ordinary duties and make it easier for people to do the same. Be economical. Avoid useless excitement and demonstration. If not employed, find something to do around the house, or follow your hobby. Occupy your mind. Sit tight!’

It was announced that the Army was to be mobilized and the next day, Wednesday 5th August, the army reservists were called up and 130 men from Dursley and Wotton had 24 hours to pack and say goodbye to their families and go off to war - many of them never to return.

The troops, the nation were led to believe, would be 'home by Christmas'. Four years and millions of war dead later, those words had been seared in the national memory as the ultimate proof of the blind optimism with which the country had entered that conflict.

**The striking installation of 800,000 ceramic poppies filling the moat of the Tower of London is a visual testimony to the number of British people, never mind French, Russian, German and more, who were lost in the Great War. No one could have prepared them for what happened.**

There are 55 names on Dursley’s war memorial. **David Evans a local historian and a member of my church wrote a book a few years ago** ‘*Dursley a small town at war 1914-18’* **in which he researched the stories of each of those 55 men.**

**Stuart Deane was the first to be killed on the 17th October 1914. He was 24 years old. He was born in Cam and after leaving school had joined the staff of the Dursley Gazette. He was said to have been an intelligent boy and well liked. At some time before the war began he joined the Army and was promoted. Soon after the conflict started he was sent to France with the British Expeditionary Force. He wrote home in October 1914 to say that he was well and that he felt that the war would not last long as the Germans seemed to be meeting defeat all along the line.**

**He died in action at Ypres.**

**I could read more biographies that give personal stories of sons, brothers, husbands, boyfriends, colleagues who did not sit tight but responded to the call to action. War memorials up and down the country pay tribute to the fact that millions did not sit tight and instead paid the ultimate sacrifice in the ‘War to end all Wars’. We remember them to day, their courage and bravery in the face of battle. They gave their today for our tomorrow.**

On this Remembrance Sunday we remember all who have had to respond to armed conflict not just in the First World War and the Second but also in consequent conflicts. Just the other week British troops returned after 13 years serving in the hostile conditions of Afghanistan. 453 British military personnel lost their lives in an effort to try and give that troubled country an opportunity for freedom and a more just society. We pray their lives have not been lost in vain. They were prepared to stand in harm’s way on behalf of others.

**Our Bible readings today are both the set readings for this Sunday in the Anglican lectionary. The parable of the bridegroom from Matthew’s gospel is about waiting, sitting tight, being ready and being prepared.**

We are not used to waiting for the bridegroom. We traditionally wait for the bride – whose prerogative it is to be late for her wedding. It is helpful to know that the tradition at the time of Jesus required the bridegroom to arrive at the home of the bride’s family, claim the bride, and take her to his own house. The bridesmaids waited at the groom’s house, ready to welcome the couple and celebrate their new beginning.

Waiting for the bridegroom meant being prepared, not merely passing time. In this parable, some bridesmaids neglected their oil lamps and so did not have any light when it mattered.

Jesus uses the parable to make the point: ‘Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour’.

Jesus’s key message is stay awake, be vigilant, be prepared.

The day’ is taken to refer to the coming of Christ – the final judgement when evil is vanquished and good triumphs. Christians still await that day – but the hope for the day of the Lord is a hope that good triumphs in the end – it is a basic human dream and desire.

There are many who say that evil is so overpowering that our efforts to combat it are futile. There are pessimists who contend that there is no way we can drive back the negative malignant forces that seem to dominate our society.

This June saw the 70th anniversary of the D Day landings. My own father was involved in them. Imagine speaking to a group of heroic men and women in France, part of the underground movement that struggled against the domination of the Nazi powers. If you had been able to talk to them, you might have questioned the seeming futility of their efforts. You might have said, ‘how do you think you can overthrow the Nazis? Together you are nothing but a ragtag army, poorly equipped and overwhelmingly outnumbered. You don’t stand a chance against the tyrannical forces that control your nation’.

They might have responded: ‘you don’t understand! While we struggle against the forces of evil that now dominate our nation, there is a huge invasion force being assembled across the English Channel. No one knows the day or the hour when the signal will be given. But one of these days, it will be given! Then, a huge armada of ships will come across the channel and invade our country. We will join them and they will carry us to victory!’

We sing of another country whose ways are ways of gentleness and all her paths of peace. We proclaim faith in the hymn Abide with me: ‘where is death’s sting, where grave thy victory? I triumph still if thou abide with me’. The mystery of death confronts us all and a day of remembrance reminds us of the great sacrifice and loss many made on our behalf. The Christian faith, founded on the resurrection of Jesus, proclaims ultimate triumph over suffering and death, even if that suffering and loss of life may have seen futile – it is taken up and redeemed for a greater good. The hope is that the day of the Lord will be vindication.

The prophet Amos writing about 700 years before Christ, criticised the society of his day who had grown complacent and comfortable. They thought God would be on their side at the day of the Lord, but the prophet’s message was that they had neglected justice and righteousness (right living, right relationships). Like the foolish bridesmaids they had fallen asleep, lost the plot, neglected to work for a just society.

Are we becoming too comfortable and complacent? Are we alert to know when an injustice is being committed and are we ready to act? Are we watching for when peace is disturbed and are we equipped to bring reconciliation?

We remember those who made the greatest sacrifice but remembering is not enough: we pray that we may be worthy of their sacrifice. Those who gave their lives, at their most noblest, gave their lives for our freedom. Our freedom from tyranny and oppression, that we wouldn’t live in a land where people were victimised or scapegoated, a land where people were free to speak their minds, live democratically, strive for a fairer society. Let us not become comfortable and complacent to these struggles, here or abroad. Let us keep awake, keep the lights on, not just sitting tight but prepared and ready to act.

After the victory of the Allied forces at the Battle of the Bulge, Winston Churchill was a guest at a dinner held in Westminster. The gentleman who introduced Churchill declared that the battle of the Bulge proved, once and for all that the British soldiers were braver than the Nazi soldiers on the day.

When Churchill rose to speak, he started off by saying, ‘with due respect I must challenge my honoured colleague. The British soldiers were not braver than the Nazi soldiers. The difference was that the British soldiers were brave for five minutes longer.’

In uncertain times, when we may be fearful for the future, remember to hang in there!’ keep going to the end – for those who keep awake will endure and win the victory.

Amen.