SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 08, 2026
Remembrance Sunday

Choral Evensong with Act of Remembrance
4:00 pm

+

A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner
on
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Romans 8:31-39

+

A Solemn Obligation

"They fought together as brothers-in-arms. They died together and now they sleep side by side. To them we have a solemn obligation."

Words of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet during World War II at the dedication of the 2nd Marine Division Cemetery on the island Iwo Jima in March 1945.

To them we have a solemn obligation.

There is something very special about the month of November, and I am not thinking about the preparations for the holiday season that are so clearly well underway – I am thinking about November as the month of remembrance; of All Saints, All Souls, and Remembrance Sunday, Christ the King, and Advent Sunday with its sober themes of heaven hell, death, and judgment. Even the moving back of the clocks seems to prepare us for the particular character of this month. As a boy, growing up in Yorkshire in the United Kingdom, I remember this month vividly, especially the huge piles of leaves that had fallen from the trees in the streets; the building of massive bonfires ready for Guy Fawkes Night – November 5 – and the smell of the thick, pungent smog-like smoke rising from the fires in my father's garden. Those themes come together most vividly every time I hear Laurence Binyon's First World War poem 'The burning of the leaves:'

> *Now is the time for the burning of the leaves.*
> *They go to the fire; the nostril pricks with smoke*
> *Wandering slowly into a weeping mist.*

November is a month for remembering in particular.

It is said that dog's do not have short-term memories, that they do not remember like us. It was certainly is true of our Cairn Terrier, Bertie. Whenever I came back home after being away for a few hours, I got the exact same welcome as when I came back after being away just a few minutes having forgotten something. For humans, whose lives are dominated by time as well as space, remembering is crucially important. I guess that is why dementia or Alzheimer's is so cruel, for memories not only fade with time, they also get jumbled and mixed up.

Today, in Saint Thomas Church, we keep Remembrance Sunday and the presence of representatives of the historical and genealogical societies of New York allows us to remember. Although Remembrance Sunday is not an official day in the Episcopal Church calendar and Memorial Day is when we remember our war dead at National celebrations, it is nevertheless, observed by many churches here in the United States because of our Anglican heritage and also because it comes so close to Veterans' Day. Indeed, Whenever we honor our Veterans we instinctively remember their comrades who died for the cause of justice or peace: As Admiral Nimitz so rightly said, *to them we have a solemn obligation.*

Remembrance Sunday, Armistice Day and Veteran's Day come within the month of November – the month of remembrance when we think of the Communion of Saints and pray for the dead. Over the years there has sometimes been confusion over remembrance of the war dead and the Christian tradition of praying for all the dead. There is an old hymn that is still sung in England that compares the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to the sacrifice of a soldier on the battlefield. Perhaps this came about because of the words of Jesus from John's Gospel, "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*" (John 15:13) – a verse found on many war memorials. Whilst the sentiments are pious, the theology is, of course, not right. Jesus was not a soldier in battle, and his death was not for a cause. Jesus went on to say to his disciples *"You are my friends if you do what I command you."* And what is that commandment, dear friends? It is to **love** one another as he had loved them and, indeed, loves you and me. Love is the only real weapon that can end war, violence, and terrorism.

In our second reading from his Epistle to the Romans, Paul reflects on this when he says '*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?'* Paul reminds us that Jesus died for *all* people so that they could have life – eternal life through the forgiveness of their sins. The power of his redeeming death stretches across time and space and fills us with hope even in a world where there is still so much violence, mistrust, and war: *"No,"* he says, *"in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

It is an honorable and good thing to remember and commemorate our war dead. It is something that instructs our children and helps them understand that we need to make our world a safer and a better place in which to live, and where all are respected and live in peace; it also reminds all of us of the fallenness of our world, and that we should never, ever, glorify war even when it is for a good and just cause.

As Christians, it is equally a good and an honorable thing to pray for all the dead, for we believe in the promises of Jesus that he came to save all people and that, even now, he yearns for us all to turn to him, the source of life. In John's Gospel, Jesus said to his disciples, *"The hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live."* (John 5:25)

Our lives are often hidden with memories and hurts buried deep within and sometimes, I guess, we can think that God cannot possibly be interested in us – in me – that, somehow, I am nothing in his sight or that my life is not worth anything or, worse, has been wasted. In France, there are graveyards for the hundreds of thousands of young bodies recovered after one of the bloodiest battles of the First World War – the Battle of the Sommes – row upon row of white gravestones say the same words: *"A soldier of the Great War"* and, to this day, no one knows their names. But God knows each one of them by name.

Cecil Rice, the author of the lyrics for the hymn we sang a few moments ago, wrote those words in Washington DC where he was serving as the British Ambassador at the end of the first world war. Reflecting on the terrible loss of life on both sides of the Atlantic, the second stanza is particularly moving as it reflects on the hope of heaven and a new creation where there will be lasting peace:

Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase,

And her ways are ways of gentleness, and all her paths are peace.

Until the day comes when the whole of creation is made new, and God wipes away all tears and destroys even death itself, we will continue to remember. It is our solemn duty, but also our Christian duty to pray for peace and justice and the abolition of all forms of warfare. As Archbishop William Temple said during the Second World War in 1942, *"Our hope in wartime can only be fulfilled when we all submit our ambitions, our desires, and our policies to the Love which came down at Christmas."*

Or, as Binyon says in the last stanza of his poem:

> *They will come again, the leaf and the flower, to arise*
> *From squalor of rottenness into the old splendour,*
> *And magical scents to a wondering memory bring;*
> *The same glory, to shine upon different eyes.*
> *Earth cares for her own ruins, naught for ours.*
> *Nothing is certain, only the certain spring.*