

Remembrance Sunday 9th November 2014. Canongate Kirk.

Blood-Swept Lands and Seas of Red

The title is borrowed unashamedly from the display of ceramic poppies currently filling the moat surrounding the Tower of London; 888,264 poppies to be precise, one for each British and Colonial life lost in the course of the First World War, the centenary of the outbreak of which has prompted so many poignant commemorations since early August. Just last Tuesday I made my own way to the Tower of London to join not only the crowds of spectators looking down onto the moat but to join also my good friend the chaplain at the Tower, who kindly took me into the grassy moat itself to walk beside the poppies. Where the Prime Minister walked yesterday, your parish minister was privileged to walk a few days before! From above, it all looks as the title suggests, blood-swept lands and seas of red, a great blurred mass of red pouring out of one of the defensive portals and surrounding the Tower complex. Sorrow and love flow mingled down. But it's only when you get close to them that you can really distinguish the individual poppies, each one standing alone and representing a single life lost, but on such a massive scale. 888,264. And that, as at least one publicity-seeking art critic has helpfully pointed out, was just on one side.

On that same side, when a family lost a loved one in the Great War they received a scroll that contained the following recognition and instruction. *He whom this scroll commemorates was numbered among those who, at the call of King and Country, left all that was dear to them, endured hardship, faced danger, and finally passed out of the sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives that others might live in freedom. Let those who come after see to it that his name be not forgotten.* If every single ceramic poppy at the Tower of London today represents a name, then a century later that instruction is still being heeded. *Let those who come after see to it that his name be not forgotten.*

Our first reading this morning brought before us the names of the first disciples, Simon and Andrew, James and John, names that have not been forgotten, names of ordinary working men who also left all that was dear to them. St Mark tells us that Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed Jesus. Moreover, James and John left their father in the boat with the hired men, and followed Jesus. Between them they left so much behind, their families and their workmates, their homes and their neighbourhoods, their nets and their boats and their livelihoods, all that was dear to them...

As of old St Andrew heard it by the Galilean lake,

Turned from home and toil and kindred, leaving all for his dear sake.

I can't help thinking that's what the Tower poppies represent too. Not just the men and women who died, but all that they left behind, all those who were affected directly or indirectly by those blood-swept lands, all those who were engulfed one way or another in those seas of red. That included every parish in the land, and not least the densely-populated Canongate, so many of whose fallen sons are named on the War Memorial next door. In the Kirkyard – in the absence of a moat - surrounding Canongate Kirk, we have identified five First World War soldiers' names engraved literally on family gravestones set into the grass. None of them are buried here, they all lie where they fell, in France mainly but in Mesopotamia too and in the case of a victim of the Gretna Green train crash, at Rosebank cemetery here in Edinburgh. His name was George Simpson, of the Royal Scots; it was his brother David who died in what is now Iraq, serving with the Black Watch. Captain Alick Herries of the King's Own Scottish Borderers was killed at the Somme; Private Robert MacQuarrie, of the Machine Gun Corps, died at Messines, and Private John McConnell, also of the Black Watch, was killed in northern France close to the Belgian Border in the last months of the war. His life began a stone's throw from here, in a tenement overlooking the Kirkyard; we were literally neighbours. They all had a connection one way or another with a local family or firm and over the next four years, as a congregation we will mark the centenary of each of their deaths, at a regular Sunday service, and by laying flowers afterwards beside the stone that bears their name.

Alick Herries

John McConnell
Robert MacQuarrie
David Simpson
George Simpson

Let those who come after see to it that his name be not forgotten. They may have left their families behind, but they laid down their lives for their friends. And greater love hath no man than this. And this year of all years no greater claim on our remembrance than all those who ever fought and died in blood-swept lands and seas of red.

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small;

Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.