

Remembrance Sunday 13th November 2016. Canongate Kirk.

Acts 1:12 *Then they returned....*

Since last year's Remembrance Sunday service, we have a new war memorial here in Canongate Kirk. It marks the centenary of the Battle of Flers in September 1916, part of the wider Battle of the Somme, but the particular part in which tanks were engaged in battle for the first time. The memorial, which was commissioned by the 4th Royal Tank Regimental Association in honour of their pioneering forebears, takes the form of lists of names elegantly inscribed on a framed parchment, and it's fixed to the wall on the other side of the north-west pillar, behind the lectern and close to the regimental standard of 4RTR. It's worth a look at some point, preferably not right now but maybe later, worth a look because it has an unusual distinguishing feature. The parchment lists the names of all the men who served in those prototype tanks for the first time just over a century ago; the names of those who lost their lives are marked with a red poppy, but they are very much in the minority. So the distinguishing feature is not that here is a war memorial that lists the names of those who were killed in action, sadly there's nothing unusual in that; but rather that here is a war memorial that lists the names of those who survived, those who went to battle and faced the same risks and dangers as those who died, but lived to fight another day. In many cases they not only lived to fight another day but survived to the end of the war. *Then they returned*, as the Book of Acts puts it so succinctly. *Then they returned*. Every year the Remembrance season focusses quite rightly on those who did not return, on those who paid the ultimate sacrifice and in this centenary year of the appalling Battle of the Somme which famously began on 1st July but only really came to an end around this time in November 1916, that's all right and proper. But I for one am glad to have been reminded by our new war memorial that it is not just about those who laid down their lives, but about those for whom life went on. I don't suppose it was ever quite the same again, that life; we can hardly begin to imagine the impact on the survivors of what they had seen and endured, not least in those primitive tanks that took to the mud and the blood of Flers. It can't have been easy to go back home, to settle back into ordinary home and family and working life as if nothing had happened, and of course for many of them that was simply impossible. But nevertheless they fought their battles, they survived the war, *Then they returned...*

That first chapter of the Book of Acts also lists the names of those who returned, "returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet. When they had entered the city", we are told, "they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers". So these were the men and women who had seen Jesus die, they were the witnesses of his crucifixion and some time later his ascension, and he had told them that they were to continue to be his witnesses not just in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In the fifteenth chapter of St John's Gospel he had urged the same group of friends to look beyond the imminent laying down of his life. "I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name". But today it's their names that count. The names of those who died and the names of those who survived. *Saints and heroes strove and suffered, here the gospel to proclaim; we, the heirs of their endeavour tell the honour of their name*. Then they returned, and we, the heirs of their endeavour, tell the honour of their name and resolve to remember them too. 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.