Remembrance Sunday, November 10th, 2024

Lest we forget: these three little words are said every Remembrance Sunday, yet with war in the middle east and in Ukraine daily in our news, there seems little danger of forgetting. Perhaps the more pertinent question is, is there a way of understanding?

Its interesting that although Remembrance is explicitly about all wars, and all those who have died in war - we tend not to focus on the more recent wars and conflicts of the 20th century. Perhaps the outcomes of the Falklands, or Iraq, or Afghanistan or Vietnam are not as clearly defined. They are more complicated, not far enough away yet to be seen clearly.

So Remembrance is often about the 1st and 2nd world wars. These are the names we read out after all. Perhaps it is the scale - more than 720,000 British soldiers were killed in 1914-18, 2% of the total population - making it the most devastating war in British military history.

Another reason might be the way the dead were chosen to be remembered.
It is no accident that these names are preserved here and in every town and village in Britain,

And for that we have a failed teacher and newspaper editor to thank. Too old to fight in 1914, Fabian Ware enlisted as an ambulance driver, one of the scariest and riskiest jobs possible. Running through the trenches, minefields, and battlefields with stretchers, amidst open gunfire but with no gun to defend yourself.

In past wars from Agincourt in 1415 to Waterloo in 1815 the dead were buried at the field of battle, anonymously in mass graves, except for a few officers who were brought home by wealthy families for grandiose burials and over the top memorials in Cathedrals and stately homes.

But Fabian Ware thought that something more needed to be done for this war. With his fellow ambulance workers they not only collected the bodies of the soldiers, but identified and recorded them. And he set up an army unit, which in 1917 would become the Imperial War Graves Commission.

What Britain did was radically different not only to what had gone before, but also to France and other nations. Fabian Ware said that no bodies should not be brought home, even if families could afford to pay. They realised such special treatment would be deeply resented.

This did not go down well. People petitioned the Queen and the King, others complained that their loved ones were being buried “like dogs.”
There was alarm that a prince would be buried amongst normal men. The Countess of Selborne, who was a woman’s suffrage supporter, wrote bitterly “This conscription of bodies is worthy of Lenin.” Queen Victoria’s youngest grandchild Prince Maurice, died in

1914, and the family held out hope of special treatment for royalty until 1932, when his name was added plainly just like everyone else's.

We have Fabian Ware to thank for the details of memorials too.
That each soldier was to have his own grave, designed in a standardised way even if the family could afford something grander, and no distinction was made between a general and a private.

The Commission insisted on a plain and uniform headstone rather than a Christian cross. This suited the Empire's religious diversity - Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, and also allow extra room for name, rank, regiment and date of death. Next of kin were allowed to supply a short inscription.

Amongst all the opposition - to non-Christian memorials, or the state deciding on the memorials and their standardisation, a voice in support came from Winston Churchill.

He saw that these "memorials which will last for hundreds of years" would console relatives, to know that even "the humblest soldier" would be remembered by name, even when all the other memorials of the time will have faded and vanished away".
This was an enduring memory of a sort previously possible only for monarchs and aristocrats.

And where body parts could not be identified, the remains were given dignity.
Anonymous French graves bore crosses with the stark word "Inconnu", unknown, whereas the British headstones included whatever details could be gleaned about rank, regiment and date of death, plus the words "Known unto God".

It is always hard to judge what some wars manage to achieve - the second world war defeated the Nazis, but the Iraq wars were a bit messier.
The great war, of 1914-18, in many ways it laid the foundation for the second world war, rearranging the map of Europe. It triggered anti-colonial revolts which would result in the end of empires. It changed the place of women, fractured the class system, and it certainly brought about universal male suffrage.
One man, one vote came in 1918 - "If a man is good enough to fight for you, he is good enough to vote for you."

And the way we remember these people - by name - it roots us to them, connects us. Thanks to the research by volunteers we know where many of these people lived and their families and what they did. You can read about it in the booklet.
These men walked some of the same streets as us, saw some of the same trees, looked up at the same stars. They had hopes and dreams, lovers and friends. And none of those came to pass. When we honour their life, we remember all life. All those who fight wish only for peace. The greatest gift we can give to those how laid down their lives, is to remember that all Life is sacred, holy, precious, to God and to each other. And to work for peace.