In my last parish we had a busy funeral ministry, with barely a week passing without at least one trip to the crem. Some services stick in the memory because of events on the day, some because of family relationships, and some because of the memories shared. One such was the story of the departed grandmother, who as a little girl was taken from her bed in a village in the North Cotswolds one bitterly cold night to watch Coventry burn. It was miles and miles away, but somehow very close to home as she huddled in her nightclothes and watched the silent, sinister firework display. She later told her family that the flames of the city illuminated the reality of war for her, there, on the doorstep – interrupting ordinary lives, changing the world forever for people who had never signed up, people who wanted nothing more than to carry on as usual...people like us.

Shortly after taking that funeral, I took another – for a young man whose wedding I had conducted just a couple of years before. He fell under fire in Helmand province and the same friends and family who had packed the church for his wedding now filled it for his funeral. It made the cost of war feel very real, its stark reality close to home. The pain of war is inescapable, non-negotiable, whether you come to worship past the ruins of our beloved Cathedral or live in a village community with no visible scars.

This year, of course, we've had ample opportunity to remember the dead of World War 1, the British losses made visible by that red tide of poppies filling the moat of the Tower of London. When I was a child, Remembrance Sunday seemed to be mostly about them, the “old comrades” and each year those marching past the Cenotaph got older until the last WW1 veterans disappeared and their place was taken by survivors from WW2. For a while, there was a feeling that remembrance might not be necessary for too much longer.....that when the last veterans of the second world war died, the custom of remembering our war dead might die with them. It was too long ago and far away, no longer part of our daily world.

Then, of course, everything changed.

Now there are young men marching past the Cenotaph, men who have seen active service in Iraq and Afghanistan, men like the crew of HMS Diamond who celebrated with us here just a few weeks ago. Kids, really. We know the stories of the many boy soldiers who falsified birth dates to meet the minimum age requirements of the Great War. Thankfully, 16 year olds are no longer able to bluff their way onto the battlefield – but 19 is not so very much older...Just think. A levels one month, basic training and mobilization the next. War isn’t something long ago or far away.

That’s why we come to remember.

Remembering is the way in which we bring the past into the present, reunite the pieces of broken history and learn their lessons. Or not.

The choice is ours.

You'll know the proverb “It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness” and as we gather to remember, we have that opportunity again. It has shaped all that we do in this place from the moment that Provost Howard refused the easy route of revenge, seeking instead the costlier path of reconciliation and forgiveness – and it’s something we all need to engage with, moment by moment, day by day, as we wait for the coming of the Kingdom. The light of the bombed cities can clarify things for us, too, if we’ll let it. It’s a harsh light to see ourselves by – but sometimes we need that painful clarity, for the choice to hate is something that is open to each one of us, and we cannot ignore it. Of course, war is rarely simple. Sometimes justice and peace seem mutually exclusive, but when ethics fail us, we can choose hope.
That is our calling here…the calling to offer reconciliation and hope in place of violence and despair…but that means nothing if we proclaim it without living it too.

We must all play a part in building God’s kingdom of peace, starting right here, through the words we speak and the care we take of each other, by rejecting suspicion and hatred, by daring to take the risk of love.

Today we remember.

We remember those who have been crushed under the heartache of war, and those who are being crushed by it still. We allow the reality of war to come home to us, so that peace can come home to us too and take root in our lives. And as we do that, the promise of God is that the tiny lights our small acts represent will become part of that great light that no darkness can put out.

There is another way, and by God’s grace we will find it – so that we no longer have to watch youthful veterans march past the Cenotaph as we gather to remember.