

Sermon on Remembrance Sunday, 9 November 2025 by Rev. Bill Church (at St Mary's Hertingfordbury)



We are nearly at the end of the season of remembrance: Hallowe'en, whatever that has become; All Saints to remember unnamed champions of our faith; All Souls to remember those who have built up this church; the annual Bereavement Service to remember those close to us who have died recently; and now Remembrance Sunday today, and Remembrance Day on Tuesday, when we remember particularly those who died while serving with this country's armed forces.

What are we doing and why?

The ceremonies and traditions are pretty well set but the interpretations put on it differ and can be controversial – from some who say it has been hijacked to glorify the armed forces, to others who say the flavour has become nearly pacifist.

A parson I knew in Suffolk dreaded Remembrance Sunday because he said he felt the Royal British Legion just marched in and requisitioned his church.

And, recently, there have been some complaints that churches insisted on having services at 11 o'clock, which stopped the congregation being at the War Memorial (not, of course, a problem here, and there will be an Act of Remembrance at 11 o'clock at the War Memorial at Birch Green).

We all risk having partial or one-sided remembrance. As the names on the War memorial here in church are read out, the names are names of servicemen – and apart from one they are of men – who died in the two World Wars and in Korea, so the reading does not in itself embrace the wounded or the widowed; nor merchant seamen, emergency services or civilians.

Non-combatants also suffer and should be remembered, especially as in conflicts nowadays it is more often non-combatants who are victims, some with no connection at all to the warring factions.

For a long time our wars were expeditionary – that is British soldiers and sailors fought overseas. People at home worried and grieved but were not at risk. That all changed in the Blitz; and think today of Gaza or Sudan.

Remembrance should be as full and as open as we can make it.

Archbishop Robert Runcie upset some, including Mrs Thatcher, when he included prayers for the Argentine dead in the memorial service to mark the end of the Falklands war, but he was right to do so.

He was right to do so, because even when it is over, it is not over.

Wars, civil wars and anarchies always have echoes, usually bad, long after the last shot has been fired, and those echoes are louder and longer if hatred, bitterness and resentment are allowed to persist.

It is difficult enough anyway for those who have lost family and friends, who have only memories of those they hoped to share life with; who have been scarred by wounds, memories or displacement in conflicts old and new, or who have to help those who bear the scars.

This is ample occasion for remembrance, with pride certainly, maybe best in understated tones and also with compassion.

The title of one of Rowan Williams' books is "Why study the past?" and his answer, relevant on Remembrance Sunday, is not just for intellectual curiosity, not just to identify and avoid mistakes that previous generations may have made, but to mine the rich seams of example which history and memory provide to learn something useful about ourselves, about our church and nation, and about our future.

Good history and good remembering make us think again about things which we think we know inside out and help us take an intelligent approach to what is strange. And what better time to do just that than at this season of All Saints, All Souls and Remembrance.