

The order of service we have followed today, both here in church and at the war memorial, has, I suspect, stayed pretty much the same for a number of years. Those of you who know me well will know that is not my usual mode of operation, but somehow today, on this Remembrance Sunday, it feels right to do what we are used to doing. The reading of the names of the fallen in two world wars is something we do every year, thank you Tony, and it is clearly right that we do so. The reciting of those familiar words at the war memorial, the words adopted by the Royal British Legion as an Exhortation for ceremonies of Remembrance to commemorate fallen Servicemen and women, never lose their poignancy. Many of you here may know where they originated, but I didn't before this week, so I went looking.

Robert Laurence Binyon was too old to enlist into the army when war broke out in 1914. In fact reading about him he would have been a most unlikely soldier. He graduated from Trinity College Oxford where he read classics in 1891 having won the Newdigate Prize for poetry. He then worked for the British Museum until his retirement in 1933 writing catalogues for the museum and art monographs for himself. His loves were art and poetry.

Moved by the opening of what was then called the Great War and the already-high number of casualties of the British Expeditionary Force, Binyon wrote his poem "For the Fallen", which included the words we heard, in 1914. At the time, he was visiting the cliffs on the north Cornwall coast, either at Polzeath or at Portreath – apparently there are plaques saying this is where the poem was written at both locations!

In 1915 Binyon volunteered at a British hospital for French soldiers, working briefly as a hospital orderly. He returned in the summer of 1916 and took care of soldiers taken in from the Verdun battlefield. He wrote about his experiences in his book, "For Dauntless France" (1918) and his poems, "Fetching the Wounded" and "The Distant Guns", were inspired by his hospital service in France.

But a soldier he was not.

I then started to wonder about the second famous lines of poetry that will be read by Tony towards the end of our service: the Kohima Epitaph. For several years now it has been a part of the British Legion Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall, and consequently of other Remembrance Day services including our own.

Kohima is a hill town on the India-Myanmar border that, between April and June 1944, saw some of the bitterest fighting of the Far East campaign, as British, Indian and Gurkha units, sustained by supplies dropped by the RAF, met and defeated a Japanese offensive intended to disrupt the planned Commonwealth advance into Myanmar and even enable a Japanese advance into India. The 2nd Division's war memorial in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery at Kohima bears the epitaph that has become synonymous with the battle.

It turns out that this epitaph also was written during the First World War. It was one of a collection of twelve epitaphs written in 1916 by John Maxwell Edmonds. He was a classical scholar, also too old to be a combatant but clearly wishing to acknowledge the sacrifice that that was being made by so many, not least on the Somme, the major battle of that year.

However his inspiration was another battle long ago, that of Thermopylae fought in Ancient Greece in the year 480 BC. At Thermopylae the Spartans fought to the death trying to prevent the Persian Army from advancing further into mainland Greece.

The words of the epitaph remind us as each year passes to give thanks for all the tomorrows that we have enjoyed, because of the sacrifice of those who gave their todays during the Second World War. A sentiment as relevant in 480 BC, as it was in 1916, as it was in 1944, as it is today.

The other familiar words that appear in our service are those taken from the bible, and of those the one I would like to focus on is from the first letter of John. "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all."

When we remember those who have died for their country in wars, we cannot help sometimes putting ourselves into those war situations, and feeling a sense of darkness surrounding us. When we weekly in our Holy Communion service share the peace, the peace of God, we then quite naturally will ask ourselves where is God in times of war? The answer is that he is in the middle of any conflict, feeling the pain of all those fighting. Yes, our God doesn't want us to resort to wars but throughout all of time he has not been afraid of using war to correct injustices in the world. But God does not want us to stay in the darkness of war – he wants us to be part of the light that Jesus brings to us. The light that shows us the sheer splendour and radiant glory of God; the light that shows us God – that makes him visible to each and every one of us; the light that shows the purity and wholeness of God; that light the guides us in the way we should be going in our lives, and the light that shows us what we do wrong. He doesn't want us to stay in the darkness. But getting from the darkness to the light can be a challenge, and sometimes that challenge can be a fatal one. Just ask Jesus himself.

So as we remember, as we give thanks for those who died in wars to protect our country, I encourage you, at the same time, to look forward to the light that Jesus can bring to each of our lives today.

To finish, I want to go back to where I started. To Robert Laurence Binyon. To his complete poem, "For the fallen".

With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns for her dead across the sea.
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,
Fallen in the cause of the free.

Solemn the drums thrill: Death august and royal
Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres.
There is music in the midst of desolation
And a glory that shines upon our tears.

They went with songs to the battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.

They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;

They sit no more at familiar tables of home;

They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;

They sleep beyond England's foam.

But where our desires are and our hopes profound,

Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,

To the innermost heart of their own land they are known

As the stars are known to the Night;

As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,

Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain,

As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,

To the end, to the end, they remain.