

Exactly two years after the ending of the First World War, on 11th November 1920, a two-minute silence was held at the Cenotaph in Whitehall. The Cenotaph, newly designed by the architect Edwin Lutyens, was an empty tomb. It represented then, as it still does, all those who have died in war, many of whom have no known tomb. Hence there are no names on it as there are on other war memorials. Those town and village memorials in fact represent the graves of those named on them, originally a place for families to visit, since their loved ones were buried far away, in a foreign land, near where they fell; or in many cases had no known grave. The empty tomb is nameless because it remembers all who have died and belongs to all who mourn.

On that same day, a body was brought to the Cenotaph on a gun carriage, in a coffin draped in a Union Flag. In the coffin lay a man killed in battle and once buried. He was one of at least four who had been removed from their graves in France and Belgium. They were taken to a chapel in St Pol, in northern France, where one was selected at random, to represent all those who had died: an unknown warrior (warrior, since he may have been a soldier, airman or sailor; unknown, because he belonged not to just one family, but to every family). The empty tomb and the unnamed corpse are related in that respect. Immediately following that two-minute silence in 1920, the body was conveyed to Westminster Abbey, where it was buried in soil brought from France and covered with a slab of black Belgian marble – symbolically uniting the warrior with his brothers and sisters still buried across the Channel.

There is still a two-minute silence at the Cenotaph, now taking place at 11 am on the second Sunday in November, a silence shared by millions across the United Kingdom. But the tradition of observing a silence at that time on 11th November continues: not least at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, on the anniversary of his burial. This year I had the privilege of leading that silence and saying prayers at that tomb. It was the end of a week's duty as Chaplain to the visitors, something I have done for 16 years, following in the footsteps of Paul Hulme. The Revd Peter Rayson and I are the only Methodists in that role now.

I saw many medals last week. I saw many men in tears. They saw the faces of their friends who had died beside them, of those they had been unable to save, of those who had died at their hand. Crosses were laid by widows and children and grandchildren. They remembered those who died over a century ago, whom they never knew; and they remembered loved ones whose loss is still deeply felt. I met veterans who were in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, as I and Margaret were; and colleagues I had served with in the Balkans in the 1990s. I spoke with an ex-Marine who laid a cross for those who died on the mountains of the Falkland Islands: he had recently met some of his former enemies on a visit to Argentina and found healing there. Many others have yet to find healing.

And in all that time of remembrance, again and again we thought of Ukraine and Russia, Palestine and Israel, and conflict in other parts of the world. Rachel is still weeping for her children.

Circuit Letter 15.11.23

This prayer was written by Queen Salote of the island nation of Tonga (1900-1965), a committed Methodist:

Grant, O God, that we who are one in our need of forgiveness, may be one in our acts of compassion. May we who are made one in your love become one in our common life. May we who speak many languages dwell together as one race, in unity with our one heavenly Father; and this we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Peace be with you.

Peter

Resources/Good News

Rural Church is National Awards Finalist

Providence Methodist Chapel at Throwleigh, in the Plymouth & Exeter Methodist District, is one of the finalists for this year's National Church Awards. Each year, the National Churches Trust rewards six churches that have amazing stories to tell.

Find out how Providence Chapel reinvented itself to become a lively rural church:-

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