

By John Smith

Remembrance Day

“... a time to be born and a time to die, ... a time for war and a time for peace.” (Eccl 3:2, 8)

November 11 is a day on which to reflect and to remember. Remembrance Day is a day that pushes us beyond the small Reformed communities to which we belong and reminds us that we shine as lights in a big universe. It is a day that jolts us out of our daily routines, and it reminds us that life is a lot bigger than our personal deadlines and plans. Remembrance Day reminds us that there is a time to be born and a time to die, a time for war and a time for peace: we forget that sometimes.

We will forget it much more easily than the old and stiff veterans, clad in their precious berets, blazers, and bits of uniform, decorated with medals. That's because those berets once had mud on them, the uniforms once had bloodstains, and each of the medals has a memory attached to it. The veterans know the price of the peace which we enjoy, the peace for which they fought, because they had comrades die beside them on the battlefield. It's a time which the marching veterans will never forget, and it's a time that the spectators do not remember. Isn't it ironic that the veterans put so much effort into the memorial ceremony, while so many pay so little attention? After all, we need Remembrance Day so much more than they do: they'll never forget, but we might.

How can we remember something which many of us have never experienced? Well, the survivors of war helped us to remember by taking symbols of the war and attaching meaning to them. But if we forget what the symbols mean, then Remembrance Day loses its effect, and we watch a ceremony which we do not understand. So let's remember.

One symbolic aspect of Remembrance Day is the date: November 11. At 5:10 a.m., on Nov. 11, 1918, 3 days of negotiations between the Allies under Field Marshal Foch and the German military leaders under Matthias Erzberger came to an end when the latter signed an armistice. As soon as the Germans left the negotiating table, Field Marshal

Foch dispatched a message by radio and telephone to the Commanders-in-Chief of every Allied battlefield, a message which began with the words: "Hostilities will cease on the entire front on 11 November, at 11 a.m. French time." The 11th of November was dubbed Armistice Day: it signalled the end of the First World War. And ever since that first Armistice Day, Canadians have set aside a day to commemorate those who lost their lives in the fight for freedom. From 1921 to 1931, Armistice Day was merged with Thanksgiving. It was not until 1970 that it was officially called "Remembrance Day."

Remembrance Day is a time to laugh, to rejoice in freedom and peace; it's a time to weep, to mourn those who died in the fight for peace. It's a time to keep silence, for 2 minutes. The cus-

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tom of observing a moment of silence was started in 1919 at the suggestion of King George V of England. The king asked his people to observe 3 minutes' silence at 11 o'clock on the morning of November 11 in memory of the victims of the war and the declaration of peace. That first anniversary of the armistice found most people in the countries that had been involved in the war bowing their heads in reverent silence. Everyone dropped what they were doing and everything came to a standstill – trains halted in their tracks, cars and trucks stopped, and even ships at sea cut their engines. Since that time, 2 or 3 minutes' silence has always been observed on Remembrance Day. A few minutes of silence, to remember a time when in the sky the larks, still bravely singing, were scarce heard amid the guns below. A

few minutes of silence in which we appreciate how good it is just to be able to breathe freely, to stand up without getting shot at, to see a sunset in the sky, to hear birds sing.

Just before the two minutes of silence at every cenotaph, a lone bugler plays the "Last Post." In a military camp, the "Last Post" signals the end of the day; on Remembrance Day it symbolizes death. Just after the two minutes of silence, at every cenotaph, the lone bugler plays the "Reveille." In a military camp, the "Reveille" signals the beginning of the day; on Remembrance Day it is a reminder that the memory of the dead lives on; it symbolizes life.

Each November, some ten million bright red poppies burst into bloom, on the lapels of the men, women, and children of Canada. But did you know that the real thing blooms in the spring? In Flanders fields? During the First World War, some of the fiercest fighting took place in Flanders, Belgium, at a place called Ypres. The soldiers who did not know how to pronounce the name of the place called it "Wipers," "Bloody Wipers." Here the lush green fields were quickly turned into barren black wastes. But every spring the soldiers fighting in the trenches saw something wonderful: the black wastelands of battle would sprout vast stretches of scarlet: the poppies of Flanders' fields. Lt. Col. John McCrae, a Canadian artillery officer and military doctor, had just arrived in the middle of a fierce battle in the spring of 1915. For 17 days he worked without relief, with no time to bathe or change his clothes, and with only the briefest snatches of sleep. On one of those days, a special day, May 3, the enemy used poison gas: dead bodies lay everywhere. During a lull in the fighting, John McCrae was sitting in the back of an ambulance. He could see the growing cemetery where each grave was marked with a white cross, where the ground was covered with red poppies, and where his best friend had been buried the day before. And in the back of that ambulance, in the space of 20

minutes, he composed an unforgettable poem:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

This poem was published that same year and became famous the world round. Soon poppies gathered from the battlefields of Flanders were sold in Britain to support war expenses. The poppy became a symbol of the Allied war effort and of the soldiers who had died. After the war, the Canadian and American Legions adopted the poppy as a symbol of remembrance and of sacrifice. Yes, the poppies we buy each No-

vember were inspired by that famous poem of John McCrae.

And yet I fear that even the poppy is not as meaningful as once it was. Those who do not take the time to reflect will wear poppies for one shallow reason alone: lest they forget – that it's Remembrance Day.

We are looking towards a time when those who survived the wars are no different from those who fell in battle, when both alike are dead. We are looking towards a time when the berets,

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once spattered with mud, the bits of uniform, once stained with blood, and the rows of medals, each with a memory attached, will no longer be worn by veterans but will be tucked away in museums. And when the veterans are gone, who will remind our society of the horrors of war and the value of peace?

We can, and we must. Even though many of us do not have personal memories of war, we will never forget. Because we remember with the Word of God, which is much more enduring

than the symbols and leftover relics of war. We have more than a poppy. Poppies are bright and beautiful for the first two weeks of November, only to be discarded in the third. Like grass that withers, the poppy fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever. We point beyond the white crosses of the soldiers whose blood was shed in Flanders fields, who died not knowing the outcome of the war. We point to the cross of Christ whose blood was shed on Golgotha and who died knowing that He had won the victory. The dead who died in the Lord will hear much more than the Reveille of the lone bugler: they will hear the great trumpet blast of the archangel, and they will rise from the dead.

We observe Remembrance Day lest we forget the horrors of war, the miseries of sin. But we are not people who remember on Thursday and forget again on Friday. Because we do not pay homage to our glorious dead, but to our glorious God.

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