

100 Days of Prayer

One hundred years ago Europe, and because of colonialism much of the world beyond, was embroiled in a bitter, bloody war that had already ensued for four years. Millions had died. Communities had lost men and women of a whole generation in the bloodshed. In France and Belgium whole villages had been wiped from the map. It was in this context that, on 4 August 1918, King George V called a National Day of Prayer. 100 days later the fighting ceased and 'The Great War' came towards its end.

The last soldiers went 'over the top' at 4.20am on 11th November 1918. Forty minutes later at 5.00am, in a railway carriage deep in the Forest of Compiègne, north of Paris, the Armistice was signed. It agreed that the guns would fall silent at 11.00am. In the time between the signing and the implementation 2738 soldiers died on the Western Front. The armistice would be renewed three times in the following months before the Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28th June 1919 and the war was formally brought to an end.

This year Remembrance Sunday is 11th November, exactly one hundred years to the day since the Armistice. The time from 4th August, the centenary of George V's National Day of Prayer, to Remembrance Sunday is being observed as 100 days of Prayer. Prayer and meditation resources are online at <https://www.remembrance100.co.uk/100-days/> and we're making some printed copies available week by week in The Pennine Way.

There's a danger that occasions such as this can become merely times of reminiscence or, worse still, that events can become some sort of national jingoistic occasion.

The theme of 100 Days of Prayer seeks to use history in the right way. It helps us to reflect on the past and, using what we learn, to strengthen us to bring hope for the future. The material encourages us to be instruments of reconciliation, crossing borders and barriers, radical in our generosity and welcome.

You can visit the railway carriage in which the Armistice was signed. It's in the Forest of Compiègne where the event happened. It hasn't always been there though. It went back into service before Hitler took it back to Compiègne to use it for the French Government to sign a surrender in 1940. It then moved around Europe in 'safe keeping' until it was destroyed, either by the SS or an RAF bomb, accounts vary. The one you see today is a bit like 'Triggers Broom' in Only Fools and Horses - it's had new everything. Well except for the bogies (wheels and chassis) which are said to be original.

It may seem disrespectful to mention a comedy programme but that series included a very poignant and quote. In an early episode the character 'Grandad' is reflecting on his memories of the end of The Great War. He recalls Victory Celebrations from which the horrifically wounded were excluded or hidden away. But he remembers seeing them arriving at the station, including those who were blind or lacking limbs. Then he said: "They promised us homes fit for heroes. They gave us heroes fit for homes". That scene, and the final slow motion scene in 'Blackadder Goes Forth' when the characters go "over the top" and the screen fades to poppies, always bring tears to my eyes.

Let us reflect on the horrors of the past, and the causes of them, and use them to bring hope for the future as we renew our commitment to bringing peace and reconciliation.

Revd Mike Claridge