

They shall not grow old...’ Well, yes and no. They will be preserved as fading photographs, as fragile letters and as names in rolls of honour and on war memorials. But they are no longer preserved in living memory. Everyone of the First World War generation is dead, and their children, who were caught up in the Second World War are, if still alive, in their eighties and nineties. It won’t be long before they too have left us. Modern technology can enhance recordings, but the voices of direct experience are becoming increasingly distant. There have been more recent conflicts, terrible for those directly involved but with little impact on most of our everyday lives. Few, if any, of us have seen a parent, partner or child go off in uniform to fight, or dreaded the summons of the doorbell which could bring news of injury or death on a battlefield. We haven’t huddled in air-raid shelters, dug people out of bombed buildings, made guns or bombs or aircraft parts, or nursed the victims of the resulting carnage. We see the participants in the Invictus Games and wonder at their courage and tenacity. Medical skill rebuilds smashed bodies in ways that were impossible fifty or a hundred years ago. But we cannot remember in the way that those who were ‘there’ – in whatever capacity – could not and cannot help but remember.

We are extraordinarily lucky. We are here. None of the accidents of war lopped off the particular branch of the family tree from which we are descended. Because we are here it is our unavoidable responsibility to make sure that no-one ever again has to go through the appalling tragedy of war. We can encourage and promote peace in many ways: in how we bring up our children and in how we respond to poor, hungry and oppressed people around the world. We must take a responsible part in community life, listening and helping, using moderate and reasonable language and argument, intervening to stop conflict developing and trying to resolve it when it does. Ordinary people don’t start wars, but the behaviour and opinions of millions of ordinary people send powerful messages to our rulers which they ignore at their peril.

In some ways, remembrance has moved on, and rightly so. Our own memorial includes people who died by enemy action in the blitz or the doodlebug raids, as well as those who died in combat. We acknowledge the work and sacrifices of war workers in factories, on the land, in the merchant navy, down the mines. We recognise that it was unnumbered women who somehow kept everything going, who made do and mended, brought up the children and eventually, if they were lucky, re-absorbed the returning fighters into their families. We know now that post-traumatic stress affects many more people than those who were on the front line. But the twenty-first century mindset finds some aspects of traditional remembrance uncomfortable. We dislike the glorification of war, the emphasis on ‘King and Country’, the certainty that God was on our side. We read about the countless individual acts of heroism – but how much better if they had not been required. We do need to remember that times and opinions have changed, and have sympathy and understanding for the feelings of a hundred years ago while learning the lessons and committing ourselves to preserving peace.

About ten yards from here we have our own memorial, carefully and lovingly created by St Peter’s people. The Chapel of the Incarnation – behind me – was finished in 1913, but it was very plain. Between 1919 and 1926 the wooden reredos, depicting soldier saints, was carved and erected, the wall behind the altar panelled, the brass memorial plaques fixed to the south wall and two flags from a battalion of the Middlesex Regiment mounted beside them. This was now the War Memorial Chapel. In 1928 the curtain which separated it from the rest of the church was replaced by the carved wooden screen, and the painted figures of Gabriel, Mary and four angels attached to the east wall.

All this remained intact for ninety years. But not long ago a section of plaster fell off the east wall. Fortunately the nearby angel has survived, but it will cost about £8,000 to carry out urgent repairs. As you know, we have no reserves to pay for this. So today we are launching an emergency appeal. We must repair the wall before there is any further damage. It seems absolutely appropriate that, on the day when we remember with gratitude all those who served their country and thus enabled us to live as we do today, we ask you to contribute to the War Memorial Chapel, to honour the past and preserve the future. 'We shall remember them', in this beautiful building and in our determination to build God's Kingdom of peace, justice and mercy out in the world.