



## Remembrance Day Address

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*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.*

These lines, written by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae in the spring of 1915 - 110 years ago now - have become synonymous with remembrance. They speak of beauty blooming amidst horror, of nature persisting where lives were lost, and of a call to remember - not just the fallen, but the values for which they stood.

Back in 2024, I had the privilege of visiting the battlefields of Belgium myself. Walking through the quiet rows of graves in Ypres, I was struck by the sheer scale of sacrifice. The silence was profound, broken only by the wind and occasional birdsong - echoes, perhaps, of McCrae's larks. I laid a wreath at the grave of a soldier whose name I did not know, but whose story, like so many others, is etched into the soil of that place. It was a moment of deep reflection - not just on history, but on our responsibility to carry forward its lessons.

You may have noticed, but over the last couple of years, the poppy itself has changed. Thanks to the work of the Royal British Legion and volunteers a new plastic-free poppy, made entirely from paper, has been introduced. It's the first redesign in nearly three decades. This small change speaks volumes: remembrance must evolve, just as our understanding of sacrifice and sustainability does. The poppy remains a symbol of honour, but now also of care - for our planet, for our future, for ourselves and for the legacy we inherit.

The poppy is a flower of paradox. It grows easily, yet its life is brief. It is beautiful, yet born of blood-soaked soil. It is a symbol of remembrance, yet also of forgetting - as

ancient mythology reminds us, poppies grew along the banks of the River Lethe (LEEthee), where souls drank to forget their earthly lives. In literature, too, the poppy is linked to sleep and oblivion. Shakespeare wrote in *Othello*:

*Not poppy, nor mandragora,  
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,  
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep ...*

Even Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz falls asleep in a field of poppies...

And yet, in remembrance, we do not forget. We remember - not to glorify war, but to honour those who bore its burden.

Poets have long helped us make sense of this burden. Ivor Gurney, who survived the war but was haunted by its memories, wrote in *To His Love*:

*Cover with thick-set masses of memoried flowers  
Hide that red wet Thing I must somehow forget.*

Here, the poppy becomes a veil - a way to soften the pain of loss, to offer beauty where once there was brutality.

Jane Weir, writing nearly a century later, revisits this theme in her poem *Poppies*, composed in the shadow of modern conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. She writes from the perspective of a mother watching her son go off to war:

Three days before Armistice Sunday  
and poppies had already been placed  
on individual war graves. Before you left,  
I pinned one onto your lapel, crimped petals,  
spasms of paper red, disrupting a blockade  
of yellow bias binding around your blazer.

Sellotape bandaged around my hand,  
I rounded up as many white cat hairs  
as I could, smoothed down your shirt's  
upturned collar, steeled the softening  
of my face. I wanted to graze my nose  
across the tip of your nose, play at  
being Eskimos like we did when  
you were little. I resisted the impulse  
to run my fingers through the gelled  
blackthorns of your hair. All my words

flattened, rolled, turned into felt,  
slowly melting. I was brave, as I walked  
with you, to the front door, threw  
it open, the world overflowing  
like a treasure chest. A split second  
and you were away, intoxicated.

After you'd gone I went into your bedroom,  
released a songbird from its cage.  
Later a single dove flew from the pear tree,  
and this is where it has led me,  
skirting the church yard walls, my stomach busy  
making tucks, darts, pleats, hat-less, without  
a winter coat or reinforcements of scarf, gloves.

On reaching the top of the hill I traced  
the inscriptions on the war memorial,  
leaned against it like a wishbone.  
The dove pulled freely against the sky,  
an ornamental stitch. I listened, hoping to hear  
your playground voice catching on the wind.

Jane Weir's words remind us that remembrance is not only about those who serve, but also about those who wait, who grieve, who endure.

Today, we remember at least 134 Old Vigornians who lost their lives in conflict. But we also remember the terrible and terrifying loss their mums, dads, brothers, sisters, friends and family would have had to suffer .

As we observe the two-minute silence today, wearing our newly fashioned sustainable poppy, we are sustained by the courage and self-giving of so many who have stepped into the breach - for justice, for liberty, for others. Their sacrifice is not forgotten. It is remembered in the quiet, in the stories, in the poetry, in the symbols of remembrance.

And so, we return to Colonel John McCrae's final call:

*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.*

These words are not just a poetic farewell - they are a challenge. A torch passed from one generation to the next. It is not a call to arms but a call to conscience. To hold the torch high means to live with integrity, to stand against injustice, to be kind, to look after each other and to remember that peace is never passive - it must be actively pursued.

May God give us the strength and the clarity to work to this end - as the best way of honouring those whose sacrifice we commemorate today.

Amen

BPHC

2025