Observing Remembrance Day

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The Flanders Poppy
- featuring the cross of Christ.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
- John McCrae, 1915

Remembrance of things past

The First World War (1914-1918) was the most bloody conflict up until that time. Taking four years, it claimed more than eight million lives. But there was a time, early in the war, when the soldiers ceased shooting for a few days. It occurred during the first freezing winter of the war, at the Western Front on Christmas Eve of 1914, when the German soldiers started singing a carol: *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht* (Silent Night). The Germans held up a sign that stated: *You no shoot, we no shoot*. Someone yelled out - "Don't shoot!"

Hundreds of soldiers began climbing from their trenches on both sides, and walked toward each other into No Man's Land. They began shaking hands, laughing, joking, expressing Christmas greetings to the same people they had been trying to shoot during the last five months. *Silent Night* is sung together - two languages with one tune. Soldiers began exchanging rations, and they compared family photos. Some played soccer, with caps for goal posts. They gathered dead friends from the battlefield, for decent burial.
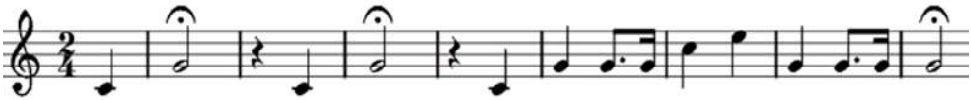
Prefiguring the journey into eternity, the troops who arose from the trench to sing songs of praise (as a basis for reconciliation) made a resurrection parable. The peace persisted briefly and then hostilities resumed, until the Armistice - at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, in 1918.

To honour those who gave their lives in the First World War and subsequent conflicts, many Commonwealth nations hold Remembrance Day services on 11th November each year, with three profound spiritually significant elements: a flag ceremony, the playing of a bugle, and the wearing of red poppies.
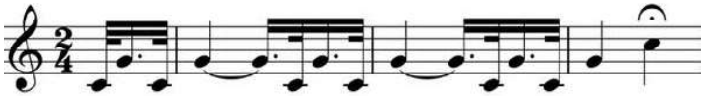
Sounding the gospel trumpet on Remembrance Day

Remembrance Day ceremonies usually include a bugle playing two tunes - the *Last Post* and the *Rouse* - which link each soldier's daily sleeping and waking with the call toward dying and rising to eternal life by faith in Christ. While soldiers are traditionally woken by the *Reveille* played upon the bugle, they are called (soon after) to rise from their beds to the sound of the *Rouse*, and the day concludes with the *Last Post*. But on Remembrance Day the order of tunes is reversed because the soldier must die before he can rise. Thus the *Last Post* is played first, and then the *Rouse* (after one minute of silence), so that we might ponder the call upon each person to sleep at the end of the day (or in death) and then to rise at dawn (or at the trumpet call to eternal life).

The *Last Post* (opening phrase)



The *Rouse* (opening phrase)





Rising to life at the call of a trumpet is denoted in many biblical texts. So Jesus declared about himself: *"the Son of Man ... will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect ..."* (Matthew 24:30-31). Then Paul wrote: *We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed ... the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable ...* (I Corinthians 15:51-52). He also declared: *... the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first* (I Thessalonians 4:16).

Reference to the biblical Last Trumpet is made in the third stanza of the hymn *O Valiant Hearts*, which is sung on Remembrance Day in many nations:

Splendid you passed, the great surrender made;
Into the light that nevermore shall fade;
Deep your contentment in that blest abode,
Who wait the last clear trumpet call of God.

- Sir John Stanhope Arkwright (1872–1954)

Flagging the victory of life over death



The flag denotes deep spiritual truth on Remembrance Day. Indicating lamentation and the temporary triumph of death, the flag is lowered slowly to half-mast (half-staff) at 10:30 am, one flag's depth below the peak, making room for the imaginary Black Ensign (the Flag of Death).

Then comes a recital of *The Ode of Remembrance,* from the fourth verse of the poem *For the Fallen* - by the English writer Laurence Binyon. First published in *The Times* newspaper in London on 21st September 1914, it entered usage in 1921 as part of services within Commonwealth nations on Armistice Day (known as Remembrance Day in Australia from 1977):

> *They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;*
> *Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.*
> *At the going down of the sun and in the morning*
> *We will remember them.* [The people echo: *We will remember them*].

Next comes the playing of the *Last Post*, followed by a minute of silence. Then as the bugle plays the *Rouse*, to denote resurrection, the flag is slowly raised to the peak, signifying the triumph of life over death, by our Lord Jesus:

> *... Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ... For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.* (I Corinthians 15:20-23).

Sleeping and waking, dying and rising - in Scripture

Along with the dying soldiers who prefigure spiritual realities, everyone dies daily in sleep and awakens to new life, as a testimony and a rehearsal. Hence the Bible links sleeping and waking with dying and rising. So we read that *Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake ...* (Daniel 12:2). Regarding a dead girl, Jesus said: *"She is not dead but asleep"* (Luke 8:52), and about the dead man Lazarus at Bethany, Jesus said: *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up"* (John 11:11). Then Paul told the Ephesians (5:14): *Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead ....*

Another prefigure of dying and rising is found among plants as they enter the earth as apparently dead seeds that come alive. So the red poppy, indicative of bloody battlefields, is often connected to resurrection and remembrance.

Consider the poppies

The red poppy became internationally symbolic of remembrance as follows: In 1915 the Canadian soldier John McCrae composed *In Flanders Fields* as he noticed poppies arise in soil disturbed by burial. It is the first plant to emerge from devastated battlefields. In 1918 Moina Michael urged the wearing of poppies to honour dead soldiers, and wrote:

Oh! you who sleep in Flanders Fields,
Sleep sweet - to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died.



John McCrae



Moina Michael

As noted in I Corinthians 15:36-38, we rise to eternity like seed from the soil:

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined ....

Holding commemorative services which honour the fallen

Remembering all who gave their lives to secure peace and freedom, Australia traditionally holds ceremonies on the morning of Remembrance Day:

- 10:30 - lowering the flag to "half-mast", followed by hymns and prayer;
- 10:58 - reciting the *Ode of Remembrance* (with the last line echoed);
  - playing the *Last Post* on the bugle - as a call to sleep in death;
- 11:00 - keeping a minute of silence - denoting dead soldiers asleep;
- 11:01 - raising the flag as the bugle plays the *Rouse* - the call to rise;
- 11:02 - quoting the words "Lest we forget" (echoed by the audience).

To explore those profound elements, churches can hold outreach services and circulate Remembrance Day bookmarks or cards. Thanks can be sent to military personnel who keep the peace until the return of the Prince of Peace:

He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore (Isaiah 2:4).

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