

“What we need is another war!” This is one of the strangest comments that has ever been shared with me on a pastoral visit. Twenty-five years ago, I was visiting the husband of one of my church members when I was in Scotland. He been in the North African campaign in the Second World War and looked back fondly on the comradeship that he had experienced. Everyone had a common aim and was pulling in the same direction. He showed me photographs of himself in the desert with his comrades. For him, remembering was important. He only ever came to church on Remembrance Sunday. As he looked on the social disintegration that he saw around him in the early 1990s, he said, “What we need is another war”. He’d had a good war and wanted to remember it.

My maternal grandfather fought in the trenches in the First World War. He was one of 10,000 prisoners of war in the camp at Langensalza. I only know this because the dates are written in the front of a Bible that he had with him. He never talked about it. He didn’t want to remember. Remembrance Sunday was the only Sunday that he didn’t go to church. He worked for most of his life on the trams in Sunderland. The Corporation gave him a beautiful, coloured certificate when he came back from the war. It is still in pristine condition. He didn’t display it. He kept it wrapped in brown paper. He’d not had a good war and he didn’t want to remember.

When I began my ministry, it felt as if Remembrance Sunday was dying out. An aging group of old soldiers gathered at the war memorial each year to remember. Soon, there would be no one left to do to the remembering. One of my members had been a keen cine film maker after the war. I spent an evening with him watching some highlights from his collection. Town galas were a prominent feature, as was Remembrance Sunday. There was the parade of cadets to the war memorial. It went on and on and on. So many were there. All had been personally touched by the war.

I grew up in the Cold War. It was a time of great fear, but little actual conflict. War was something that you learned about in history. Whilst our armed forces have always been needed somewhere in the world, and there have always been fatalities, they were comparatively few. The same has not been true of the 21st century. In recent years, the numbers gathering to remember have increased. One year, I stood next to a colleague whom I only vaguely knew. I thanked him for coming. “I couldn’t do anything else”, he said. “My son died in Afghanistan”. The reality of war had hit his family hard.

The First World War was the Great War, the war to end all wars. If only that last statement was true. The First World War was so brutal that politicians in the 1930s did everything that they could do avoid another one. We look back on appeasement as weakness. To them, it was their best attempt to avoid something far worse. Although it had its horrors and deeply affected many families, the Second World War was comparatively a good war. Hindsight makes us wonder why we weren’t ready to engage in it earlier.

Robin Jenkins’ novel, “The Cone Gatherers”, depicts life in a Scottish forest during the Second World War. Those who are unable to fight or are conscientious objectors are there to collect the pine cones before the forest is cut down for the war effort so that it can be replanted. It is a place of great tranquillity where it is hard to remember that there is a war on. It is a place of hope where the seeds for rebuilding life after the war are being collected. Despite the peace and hope, there is tension between the characters which builds and leads to a murder. External peace isn’t enough. Peace has to begin in our own hearts. As we remember the great sacrifices in wartime, let’s also remember the old song and make it our prayer, “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me”.