

Flanders Field
Homily for Remembrance Day 2022

Born in Guelph Ontario in 1872, John McCrae became a doctor whose gifts were recognized as he practiced medicine and taught pathology at McGill University. When Britain declared war on Germany August 4, 1914 Dr. McCrae was on a ship to England for a much needed holiday. Upon arrival he immediately enlisted, though 41. He returned to Canada for training and then was deployed as Lieutenant-Colonel, John McCrae. He treated soldiers' wounds at the Second Battle of Ypres in Belgium (22 April to 25 May 1915). The battle was the first in which poison gas was used as a weapon, resulting in lung damage and death. McCrae's lungs were damaged by the gas, making his asthma much worse; nevertheless, he tended soldiers at Essex Farm dressing station near Ypres — a bunker with a dirt floor and with light provided only by lanterns and the doorway.

One particular soldier's death during the battle profoundly moved McCrae. Lt. Alexis Hannum Helmer was a 22-year-old civil engineer and a graduate of McGill University. McCrae had not known Helmer in Montréal, but the two men had become good friends during the war. On the morning of 2 May 1915, Helmer was killed when a German shell exploded at his feet. His remains were gathered into an army blanket and buried in nearby Essex Farm Cemetery. As the officer present, McCrae officiated at Helmer's graveside service. A wooden cross marked the burial place.

The next morning, McCrae wrote the poem "In Flanders Fields." While there are different accounts of exactly how and where McCrae wrote those 15 lines — on an ambulance step, inside the dressing station — they are not as important as the poem's content and enduring potency.

In the horrific setting of hastily-built cemeteries alongside active battlefields, red poppies sprang from the bombarded soil. Birds sang despite the deafening sounds of war.¹

600,000 died in the First World War in Belgium. 550,000 fell in West Flanders. At least 300,000 are buried there. At least 200,000 are missing there. More than one and a half million were injured.

As we gather on this Remembrance Day I want to highlight the last part of Dr. McCrae's famous poem:

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

¹ <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/lt-col-john-mccrae>

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

In these few lines, McCrae called upon the living to join the war effort so that Helmer and millions of other soldiers in the First World War would not have died in vain.

But for us how can we continue hold the torch high as we recall the horror of World War 1 and all wars that have caused such unimaginable hardship, spiritual, psychological and physical trauma.

Well for one, it is important that this day is one we will continue to remember and give thanks that while peace is fragile and can so easily be shattered, we in Canada have lived in a country where we have not experienced war on our soil since the War of 1812. We also want to honour and give thanks to all those people who have and continue to serve in the Canadian Military and offer special prayers today for a peace in our land and an end to war in places like Ukraine.

We also want to hear what the Scriptures says to us today as we reaffirm that as followers of Jesus those who are peace makers are the children of God. For at the heart of the Lord's mission was to establish his peace, something that he repeatedly articulated after his Resurrection when he said to the Apostles "Peace be with You" It is this same peace we share at every Mass.

We can hold high to torch that has been passed onto us by remembering that in all of our relationships we can to embody the character St Paul's expresses in today's first reading by being selective in the amount of news we consume. How easy it is to be inundated with so many stories that unsettle and irritate us, leaving us in a state of unease, the opposite of peace.

Twice in the reading St Paul speaks of the peace of God that can guard our hearts as we bring everything to him in prayer and knowing that even in the challenges we face that he is with us guarding our hearts and minds in the love and knowledge of Jesus. Paul also calls us to be attentive to where we allow our minds to wander so that we are cultivating an attitude that is like the mind of Jesus Christ himself. The true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing and commendable things are to inform us. Paul says we are to keep on cultivating this kind of mindset so that if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, we are to think about these things.

In so doing we can carry on the legacy of John McCrae's Poem, not just as words penned on a battle field 106 years ago, but still filled with meaning today.

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.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

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.