

Christ Church Freemantle

Sunday 8th November – Remembrance Sunday

We will remember them

In late September I managed, more by luck than judgment to enjoy my delayed holiday in the Apennine foothills behind Pesaro on the Adriatic coast of Italy: a brief relaxation in the so called war on Covid allowing us to go and return safely.

Lying awake in bed a week later I pondered on what had been the most memorable bit of the holiday. I was surprised by my conclusion. It was not the famous towns and cities we visited, nor the mountains we drove through, but a little cemetery on a hillside in the Foglia Valley at Montecchio. Looking down on a dual carriageway and sprawling industrial units it was an oasis of order and calm; a Commonwealth War Grave Cemetery, of course. 582 soldiers are buried there, many Canadian, but also from many British Regiments, the Hampshire being prominent. Each headstone of identical design showing the badge of the regiment, the name of the soldier and sometimes a personal message below, set in serried ranks across the hillside, immaculate borders of plants along the graves and surrounded by turf so soft it was like walking on the finest thick carpet. Every lawn edge immaculately trimmed and not a weed in sight. A remarkable sight and a credit to the War Graves Commission who maintain such cemeteries around the world, in this case 76 years after these men died.



For die they did, all in the months of September and October 1944 as the Allies pushed up through Italy forcing the German Army to retreat. This hillside was the last uplands until we reach the absolutely flat lands of the Po valley which stretch to Venice 90 miles north. It was here that the Germans dug in on what was called the Gothic Line where they resisted the Allies advance until the Canadians broke through two miles away on 30th September. Here lie the soldiers who died in that advance. Standing there in the peace looking down on the



modern world bustling away below I tried to imagine the horror of war, the dignity and reverence we afford to the fallen and why there appear to be no German War Cemeteries. Of course they were retreating and eventually defeated and impoverished, but at least in the 2nd World War in Italy they have not commemorated their dead like us. Yet they were human too, conscripted mostly, and did not deserve to die.

Montecchio is a nondescript little town all but flattened in that advance as were most of the Adriatic coastal towns from allied bombardment from the sea. We often forget the civilian casualties. The push north was divided by the Apennine Mountains. Where we were the advance was up the coast. Across the mountains to the west the march towards Florence is

vividly described in a wonderful little book by Iris Origo, "War in the Val d'Orcia". Origo was Anglo American, wealthy and married to a Count who together created a model estate in the Val d'Orcia in the pre war years, lauded by Mussolini. She took in over 350 refugee children from Milan for the duration and secretly helped the Allies, but when the Allies advanced through the area the Germans used their estate to repel the advance and Origo and the children fled on foot the 35 miles to relative safety at Montepulchiano. It is a gripping read which I much recommend.

My generation is lucky as we have mostly not experienced war at close hand, yet have met many who have. I remember relatives who fought in the Great War, but never spoke of it.

A few years ago I went with my Mother to visit a neighbouring farmer, then in his 90's who was from another age. Hens scavenged in the yard, he had a few cows and never went further than Sturminster Newton to market and had been born in the parish and never been anywhere. How wrong I was as he explained that in the Second World War he fought in Egypt, was at the landings on Sicily and fought his way up through Italy ending up as a military policeman in Milan until being demobbed in 1947, then came home and never went away again. Join the Army and see the world. Many revelled in the adventure afforded them by war; the lucky ones lived to remember it.



As we remember Armistice Day this morning, regrettably not in church, I think back on members of the congregation who had personal experience of war. Les Baird told me he never expected to survive it. Dear Joan Southwell always put a photo of her brother Gerry on the Lady Chapel Altar and always remembered him and the friends she lost when a bomb fell on our Art Gallery in the blitz.

Which brings me back to Italy. Gerry Southwell died in his tank on 22nd April 1945, aged 22 just a fortnight before the German surrender. Joan always talked about it being in the Po Valley and I had thought of him as we drove down from Venice through those flat lands. Upon my return, with the help of Liz Coe I discovered exactly where he is buried, Faenza War Cemetery. If only I had known as we drove within five miles of it four times that week. Faenza is just 20 miles north of Montecchio so after the breakthrough on 30th September 1944 the Allies had advanced only that distance in seven months on flat land, impeded by winter and the drainage dykes they encountered along with stout German resistance.

Oh, the futility of war! A right cause and God is with us, perhaps true when fighting Hitler and the Nazi regime, but think of the sacrifice, civilian and armed forces on both sides and lament. Let us pray we live our lives in peaceful times, but history so often tells us otherwise. Today we remember those that gave their lives or their health in conflict and thank the War Graves Commission, the Royal British Legion and others for keeping that sacrifice and suffering fresh in our minds for at least one day of the year.

Will Green