**Remembrance Sunday 2013 Year C**

In the name of the + Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

During the early days of the Second Battle of Ypres a young Canadian artillery officer, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, was killed on 2nd May, 1915 in the gun positions near Ypres. An exploding German artillery shell landed near him. He was serving in the same Canadian artillery unit as a friend of his, the Canadian military doctor and artillery commander Major John McCrae.

As the brigade doctor, John McCrae was asked to conduct the burial service for Alexis because the chaplain had been called away somewhere else on duty that evening. It is believed that later that evening, after the burial, John began the draft for his now famous poem “In Flanders Fields”.

*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.*

And so it is that poppies have become synonymous with Remembrance, and those words penned by a Canadian doctor have passed into common knowledge.

But it does not explain just how it was that poppy wearing became the norm at this time of year. For that we need to look further south to an American, for the origin of the red Flanders poppy as a modern-day symbol of Remembrance was the inspiration of an American woman, called Moina Michael.

It was on a Saturday morning, 9th November 1918, two days before the Armistice was declared at 11 o'clock on 11th November. Moina Belle Michael was on duty at the YMCA Overseas War Secretaries' headquarters in New York. She was working in the reading room, a place where U.S. servicemen would often gather with friends and family to say their goodbyes before they went on overseas service.

On that day it was busy with people coming and going. The Twenty-fifth Conference of the Overseas YMCA War Secretaries was in progress at the headquarters. During the first part of the morning as a young soldier passed by Moina's desk he left a copy of the latest November edition of the “Ladies Home Journal” on the desk.

At about 10.30am Moina found a few moments to herself and browsed through the magazine. In it she came across a page which carried a vivid colour illustration with that now famous poem by John Macrae.

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  |

Moina had come across the poem before, but reading it on this occasion she found herself transfixed by the last verse:

*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.*

In her autobiography, entitled “The Miracle Flower”, Moina describes this experience as deeply spiritual. She felt as though she was actually being called in person by the voices which had been silenced by death. At that moment Moina made a personal pledge to “keep the faith”. She vowedalways to wear a red poppy of Flanders Fields as a sign of remembrance. It would become an emblem for “keeping the faith with all who died”.

Compelled to make a note of this pledge she scribbled down a response on the back of a used envelope. She titled her poem "We Shall Keep the Faith". The first verse read like this:

*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.*

Three men attending the conference then arrived at Moina's desk. On behalf of the delegates they asked her to accept a cheque for 10 dollars, in appreciation of her work.

Shopping later that day Moina came across one large and twenty-four small artificial red silk poppies in Wanamaker's department store. When she returned to duty at the YMCA Headquarters later that evening wearing one of the poppies, the delegates from the Conference crowded round her asking for poppies to wear themselves. And so she gave out the rest of the poppies to the enthusiastic delegates.

According to Moina, this was the first group-effort asking for poppies to wear in memory of “all who died in Flanders Fields”. Since this group had given her the money with which to buy them, she considered that she made the first sale of the Flanders Fields Memorial Poppy on 9th November 1918.

Some might have left it at that, but Moina Michael was determined to put all her energy towards getting the Poppy emblem adopted in the United States as a national memorial symbol. She was encouraged by a positive reaction to the idea by the press.

She began a tireless campaign at her own expense, starting with a letter to her congressman in December 1918. In the letter she asked him to put the idea to the War Department, which he immediately did. She wanted to act swiftly so that this new emblem might be already be produced in time for the signing of the peace treaty at Versailles in June 1919.

Her Christian upbringing inspired her to believe that the Flanders Memorial Poppy was indeed a spiritual symbol with more meaning behind it than pure sentimentalism. She likened the new optimism for a world returned to peace after the “war to end all wars” to the magnificent rainbow which appeared in the sky after the terrible flood in the bible, a sign that God’s hand was guiding the way.

So as we wear poppies with pride let us not only give thanks to God for all those who have given their lives in successive generations and conflicts that we might live in peace. And let us remember too that it was the inspired determination of just one person, Moina Michael, that gave us our poppy wearing custom. In like manner let us each individually work for that which brings people together in friendship and trust for the good of all.

In the name of the + Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.