

November 2023 - The Unknown Soldier – then and now.

Ruth 1:16 “Where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God.”



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November is a month of remembering. To ‘re-member’ – to bring back to the fore front of our minds that which has gone before. To remember the sacrifice and the courage – to remember the horror, the fear and the sorrow – to remember not to forget.

As we watch our TV screens and see the news, we are horrified – we are filled with sorrow. Victims, named in the press, with photographs shown – and those unnamed, unseen and yet to be found.

Whatever your views – Saturday 7th October 2023 matters.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was once asked what he thought it meant to be a Jew. He replied by quoting someone else – he quoted Isaiah Berlin. Isaiah Berlin wrote, *“To be a Jew is to have a sense of history.”*

Rabbi Sacks was asked if he agreed – he said, *“I think Isaiah was almost right... to be a Jew is to have a sense of memory”.*

We need a sense of memory too.

What do we remember? What is our sense of memory as a Christian people (and a persecuted minority in many places in the world today)? Soon to become a minority in the UK, most certainly in terms of commitment and practice. It matters who we are, and where we are from. In 2022 the Talking Jesus Report suggested that only 48% of the UK described themselves as Christian with only 6% describing themselves as 'practising'. This is really quite staggering, but also unsurprising – and deeply worrying.

Perhaps we need to re-remember the significance of the 'Unknown Soldier'.

In the October of 1920 the Government considered a proposal suggesting 'the remains of one of the numerous unknown British soldiers who fell and were buried in France should be exhumed, brought to England... and given a military funeral in Westminster Abbey on November 11th'.

Every precaution was taken to ensure the soldier's identity would never become known.

The service would coincide with the unveiling of the new permanent Cenotaph, and the King went on to unveil this.

The thinking behind this: - To have an anonymous soldier, unknown, without a photograph, without a name, so the unknown soldier belonged to everyone – and even to us today.

The coffin, draped with the Union Flag was brought to Dover with a 19-gun salute. The band played 'Land of Hope and Glory'. Tickets for the event at the Abbey were allocated by ballot. Tickets were open to three categories:

- 1) women who had lost a husband and one or more sons;
- 2) mothers who had lost an only son or all sons;
- 3) widows

Most of the applications came from mothers who had lost an only son or all or their sons.

The mourners lining the route consisted of all ranks from all the forces, along with those in receipt of the Victoria Cross (100 people). Everyone was included. They were united in their grief.

Today, the tomb of this soldier remains the only one in Westminster Abbey where you are not allowed to walk.

The late Queen Mother, laid her wedding bouquet on the tomb when she married King George VI in 1923: even today, Royal brides who marry there do the same. The Queen Mother also requested that her funeral wreath be placed there when she died.

Today many are dying in war. Civilians and Soldiers alike.

Today we remember those who have gone before us to fight evil, to fight terrorism and to bring justice – to **‘set the captives free’**. (Isaiah 61:1)

Today we remember those brave enough to stand up to terrorism, defend their way of life and to never give up on the lost and stolen.

God’s heart must bleed. As our hearts should do too. I am reminded of the words from our holy scriptures, from the Book of Ruth, shared with that of our Jewish brothers and sisters -

“where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God”

May we have a sense of **memory** as well as of **history**.

May we **never** ever **forget Saturday**.

<https://www.findmypast.co.uk/blog/history/tomb-of-unknown-warrior#:~:text=Not%20knowing%20where%20any%20of,The%20others%20were%20then%20reburied.>

<https://www.christianpost.com/news/talking-jesus-survey-finds-only-6-percent-of-brits-identify-as-practicing-christians.html>