John 15.9-17
Keswick Service of Remembrance
10 November 2019

Night on the cold plain,
invisible sands lift,
peripheral shadows stir,
space between light and dark
shrouding secrets;
old trades draped grey.
Here too poppies fall,
petals blown on broken ground,
seeds scattered on stone
and this bright bloom,
newly cropped,
leaves pale remains,
fresh lines cut;
the old sickle wind
sharp as yesterday.

The poem *Helmand* was written by John Hawkhead in 2009. It compares the opium growing poppy fields of Afghanistan with the poppy as our symbol for Remembrance. *Here too poppies fall, petals blown on broken ground, seeds scattered on stone*.

Hawkhead's poem reminds us, I think, that remembrance and brokenness go together. The poppy reminds us that *we will remember*, but that remembering is costly. *Here too poppies fall, petals blown on broken ground, seeds scattered on stone*.

Poppies grow best on broken ground, just as *love* runs deepest in broken hearts. Poppies grow best on broken, churned up ground. We have beauty and brokenness, together, in one place. Dead ground giving life. Hope rising out of destruction. Brokenness first, then the beauty of the flower – a beauty that seems impossible in a ravaged land, a disfigured world. But there it is, there's beauty, beauty where we didn't think to find it, beauty where the world didn't deserve it.

Field poppies begin to germinate when the soil is disturbed, and they're exposed to light. It's why they're often found in ploughed fields, or roadside verges. The shell-churned fields of the First World War had all the right conditions. Poppies can be incredibly prolific. Each flower produces 17,000 seeds, about 3,000 of which remain viable. They can lie dormant for a

hundred years, before bursting to life at the sign of light.

Poppies are a resilient and enduring mystery. Persevering, unbroken, staying alive through generations. A bit like love – resilient through hardship, never giving up, incredibly prolific, surprising by its tenacity, moving in its tenderness, and ever present in tragedy. It's no wonder, really, that poppies became our national symbol of remembrance, because they speak to us of the deeper value of the deepest love that lives in broken hearts.

"Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Jesus' own message of love and loss speaks to us today. Love is seen at its deepest at our times of loss. Today we share a time of loss as a nation, as so many individuals, families and communities experience once again their own deep sense of pain and loss. Love is very personal, and so is our sense of loss. Whether we recall family members, friends, comrades, colleagues, neighbours or people we never knew, we nonetheless come together to express our thanksgiving and love for the gift of

their lives. By supporting one another in love and mutual respect, our prayer is to find hope in the midst of our brokenness, peace in the midst of turmoil, and justice in the midst of chaos.

As a nation, as a community, as individuals, we stand in this place today to pay tribute to all who have lived and died in the service of our country, to pay tribute to all who gave their today for our tomorrow. Through friendship, bravery, self-sacrifice, endurance and love, those no longer with us *remain with us still* because we remember them. We pay tribute to those who are gone, and offer our thanks to those who live, whose future has changed because of their service, whose lives will never be the same because of what they did and had to do, because of what they saw and what they remember, because of the scars they carry on their bodies or bear in their hearts. We give thanks, too, for those who serve us today, facing danger and death like the generations before them. We pray for all who are affected by the tragedy and distress of war, asking that God might grant them peace, wholeness and relief from anxiety.

In 1915, Roland Aubrey Leighton was killed by a sniper at the age of 20, four months after his fiancée had accepted his proposal of marriage. Leighton's fiancée was the author and poet Vera Brittain, and she wrote this poem about her experience. I think it tells us something about the love that never goes away, but also the hope that may yet rise out of brokenness. The poem is called 'Perhaps'.

Perhaps some day the sun will shine again,
And I shall see that still the skies are blue,
And feel once more I do not live in vain,
Although bereft of You.

Perhaps the golden meadows at my feet
Will make the sunny hours of spring seem gay,
And I shall find the white May-blossoms sweet,
Though You have passed away.

Perhaps the summer woods will shimmer bright,
And crimson roses once again be fair,
And autumn harvest fields a rich delight,
Although You are not there.

Perhaps some day I shall not shrink in pain
To see the passing of the dying year,
And listen to Christmas songs again,
Although You cannot hear.

But though kind Time may many joys renew,
There is one greatest joy I shall not know
Again, because my heart for loss of You
Was broken, long ago.

Poppies may grow best on broken ground, and love may run deepest in broken hearts, but the broken ground is still broken, and the broken hearts may remain unmended. Pain and hope live side by side, but *always* moving, we pray, and with God's help, towards the possibility of healing, the renewing of life and the building of peace. We owe it to those who have died. We owe it to those who live. Amen.