

Sermon preached by

The Rt Rev'd Dr Martin Seeley, Bishop of St Edmundsbury & Ipswich

Royal British Legion Centenary – St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sunday 19 September 2021, 3.30pm

Text: Luke 10:25-37

We are here to celebrate the founding of the British Legion, as it was known at first, one hundred years ago, and give thanks for a century of support and care for ex-service personnel and their families.

It was on Sunday 15 May 1921 that a small group of ex-Servicemen and representatives from the four organisations, The National Association of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers, The British National Federation of Discharged and Demobilized Sailors and Soldiers, The Comrades of The Great War and The Officers' Association walked to the Cenotaph in London. As Big Ben struck nine, the four men representing the organisations laid a wreath with the badges of the four organisations that would officially unite to form the British Legion.

We must not underestimate the achievement. Those four founding organisations did not entirely see eye to eye, with differing purposes and political affiliations, but the sheer scale of the suffering of ex-service personnel and their families meant internal disagreements were overcome to produce a concerted and united effort to care for those who had suffered as a result of service in the Armed Forces during The Great War, whether through their own service or through that of a family member, and to care without distinction of rank or position.

Indeed when the constitution of the newly formed British Legion was agreed it was proposed by a junior soldier and seconded by a General. There were to be no divisions in this outpouring of compassion and assistance – no distinction of rank or status.

Suffolk was in at the start, notwithstanding Julian Tennyson's assertion in our second reading that we are "content to amble along at least a century behind"!

By the end of 1921, twelve branches had been formed in Suffolk stretching from Newmarket to Lowestoft and 100 years on, Suffolk has a vast network of branches who remain to this day committed to the original purpose of providing help and support to members of the armed forces community and their families.

The newly formed British Legion was quick to act, launching the first-ever poppy appeal in the same year, 1921, and raising over £106,000 – a vast sum of money at the time, equivalent to more than £5M today, raised in midst of post-war national financial straits.

The fundraising efforts grew year on year, and the famous Flanders poppy would become an enduring symbol of remembrance, sacrifice and hope. Within a few years of its founding, the Legion was granted a royal charter and in 1971 became the *Royal* British Legion.

The success of the poppy appeal and the work of the Royal British Legion was built, as now, upon the determined effort of thousands of

members and volunteers. Sir Frederick Lister, who was instrumental as one of the founders and served as the first chairman remarked in those early days of 1921 '... the part the British Legion will play in the nation will be decided by the branches of the Legion.'

It is through those branches, not least here in Suffolk, that the care for forces personnel and their families has been continued to this day. Helping in the most practical ways, ensuring that care, equipment, facilities are provided for ex-service personnel and families in need, has been the enduring activity of the Royal British Legion.

The story of the Good Samaritan was selected for this afternoon precisely because of this resonance with care for those in need. It's a story Jesus was prompted to tell when a lawyer who was quizzing Jesus had declared he had kept the commandments to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself and then, in a rather lawyerly fashion, pressed the matter by demanding, 'who is my neighbour?'

The story of the Good Samaritan is, at its core, a call to compassion and service towards a fellow humans in distress. Everyone is our neighbour, even the most unlikely. In a very straightforward way, the centenary of the Royal British Legion marks 100 years of commitment to that very principle, - caring and supporting all those who have served in the Armed Forces and their families, regardless of who they are or where they are. There is no walking by on the other side. Someone is in need, so you help.

But the story of the Good Samaritan offers deeper insights into what loving service towards our neighbour means and it is striking how the

work of the Royal British Legion over the last 100 years reflects these in the way it has and continues to operate.

The help the Samaritan offers goes well beyond the immediate needs of the injured man. He first bandaged up the injured man's wounds and then takes him to an inn.

And instead of handing him over to others who, by rights, should take responsibility for him, the Samaritan remains with the injured man and stays with him through the night. He goes on to provide for his longer-term care, paid for by himself, with the commitment to meet any further costs on his return.

We have no idea of the circumstances of the Samaritan but two denarii were roughly a few days wages so not an insignificant sum of money. The Samaritan shows no sign of saying 'I think I have done enough' but does everything in his power to ensure the injured man is restored to health.

The work of the Royal British Legion over the last 100 years reflects the Good Samaritan's sense of ongoing responsibility and the long term commitment to those they serve. The Royal British Legion has always recognised it has that commitment to all those who seek its help and the commitment is lifelong to every member of the armed forces from the moment they receive a single day's pay. It can often be the case that a person may not need to call on the Royal British Legion until well after they leave the armed forces but in any eventuality, the commitment still stands.

Then the Good Samaritan shows a remarkable boldness of character. In offering to help the man from Jericho, the Samaritan takes on considerable risk. He could easily have been accused of being the attacker, potentially risked being attacked himself or accused by his own people of helping the 'enemy' on account of the hostile relationship between the people of Israel and the Samaritans. Yet, the Samaritan is prepared to take on the risk to serve a higher purpose.

One hundred years on, it is easy to forget the challenges and risks the original supporters of the British Legion faced. The first appeal was launched in the post-war economic depression. Unemployment was at a staggering two million people by 1921 and poverty and hardship were common experiences for all. Despite the conditions, the founders of The Legion would not be deterred from their commitment to help.

We see something of this determination in a letter written in 1922 by Major George Howson MC, the founder of 'The Discipled Society' which later became the famous 'Poppy Factory' offering employment to disabled servicemen.

Howson, reflecting on the challenge ahead wrote to his parents saying

'I have been given a cheque for £2000 to make poppies with; it is a large responsibility and will be very difficult. If the experiment is successful it will be the start of an industry to employ 150 men. I do not think it can be a great success, but it is worth trying. I consider the attempt ought to be made if only to give the disabled their chance'

Moved by compassion, Howson's 'Poppy Factory' would become a life changing enterprise that continues to this day. In 2010 The Poppy Factory launched the 'Getting You Back to Work' service and to date, it has helped over 1,000 veterans into civilian employment.

One of the most important roles the Royal British Legion play in the life of the nation is in calling all of us to remember the dedicated service and sacrifice made by so many members of the armed forces over the last 100 years. Through its work with schools and in the quiet dignity of the many Acts of Remembrance that happen across the country, as well as the great Festival of Remembrance in the Albert Hall, the Royal British Legion has passed on to successive generations the ideal expressed in the motto of 'Service before self' – calling all of us, in whatever forms we can, to service and compassion. And it is striking to me that in the course of my ministry of over 40 years awareness and observance of Acts of Remembrance and what they represent seems to have steadily increased, thanks in no small part to the work of the Legion.

So the Royal British Legion, an organisation of good Samaritans, serving others before themselves, and continuing to do so throughout this pandemic when so many ex service personnel and their families have been so terribly affected.

And in being such an organisation this one hundred years, living out that commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves, you have also been living out the first part of that commandment – to love God with all your heart and soul and strength, for in loving every child of God you are loving the one who made each one of us and to whom we each return.

We have learned through this pandemic once again that it is our care for one another, our loving our neighbours near and far, that really matters, that really does make the world go round, that reflects the will of the God who made us all.

So I thank God for you, the Royal British Legion here in Suffolk, for living that out year after year,
and I thank God for all you will do in the years to come.

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