



The Grave of the Unknown Warrior: why you cannot call anyone *ordinary* by The Very Reverend Dr David Hoyle, Dean of Westminster

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On 6th September 1997 a funeral procession arrived at the doors of Westminster Abbey. The world was paying attention. There were 2,000 people inside the Abbey for the service, but something like two and a half *billion* people were watching it on television, across the world. This was the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales.

The procession had come from Kensington Palace, two miles away. Roads had been closed, nothing was allowed to obstruct the route or interfere with the occasion. Then, however, just inside the doors of the Abbey, the eight men from the Welsh Guards, carrying the heavy coffin (it was lined with lead) had to step smartly sideways and work their way round a smooth, black marble stone surrounded by poppies. This is the Grave of the Unknown Warrior. No one walks on this grave.

Rather than retelling the story of how an unknown soldier from the First World War ended up being buried in the Abbey in November 1920, I want to say something about why it matters so much, and why *this* grave, in a place where so very many famous people are buried, is so special.

The Unknown Warrior is buried in Westminster Abbey to help us remember. Remembering things is not always as easy as you might think. If I ask you 'What did you have for breakfast?' you will probably remember that (unless you did not have breakfast). If I ask you 'What did you do last weekend?' you will probably remember that too. If I ask you 'What did you do a year ago, today?', that would be a harder question. I might have to help you out with a picture of where you were, or a story from a year ago. Sometimes we need things to help us remember.

When we talk about what happened over a hundred years ago, it is much harder to remember. No-one now truly *remembers* what it was like to be a soldier in the First World War. We all need reminding, with the help of history books and television programmes, just how terrifying and terrible that war was. Fortunately, there are lot of stories and facts about the war and we can be helped to remember what happened. Or at least, we can remember some of it. There are things that have been forgotten and will never be remembered - what it smelt like, or felt like, to be bombed and shot at. We cannot remember, or even imagine, what it was like to be frightened not just for a few hours, but for days and for months. We cannot remember, or imagine, what it was like to lose friends and relatives, see them killed, and not be able to find them after a battle. We can remember a little; we cannot remember fully.

It is really important to know that we will never tidy up the First World War, write down some facts, tell some stories and say 'Now we can remember'. It is important not to turn that war into a story about some

people who were brave and won medals, some famous battles, gas masks, poppies and telegrams. It is really important not to think we can give it a label, put it in a box and think it is over and done with.

When plans were made to bring the body of a soldier of the Great War from a battlefield and bury him in Westminster Abbey it was decided that he would be an *Unknown Warrior*. This soldier is one of the thousands who were never identified. We do not even know which battle he died in. He certainly helps us remember the war and reminds us that so many people died (about a million from Britain, perhaps twenty million across the world). He helps us remember the pain and the loss of that terrible war. He reminds us that this is a bigger, more terrible story than we can ever tell properly. He reminds us that we just do not *know*. The Grave of the Unknown Warrior reminds us that we will never 'get over this' or put this away. We will always have to try to remember more and better.

As we think about that or as we stand at this grave (and I stand at the grave, nearly every day) and try to remember our difficult, dangerous past, the Unknown Warrior is also there to tell us something else. All around him, in the Abbey, we have buried kings and queens, prime ministers, explorers, scientists, writers and many more. All around the Grave of the Unknown Warrior are famous people. Yet this, very special grave, the one grave that nobody ever walks on, is someone who was not famous at all. We do not know who he was, what he was called, or where he came from. We do know that he lived a life like yours and mine. We know that he had hopes and dreams, felt fear and pain, loved and (let's hope) was loved. He lived a life as important as your life and my life. He was as important as you and me, and he was as important as all those prime ministers and poets, and kings and queens. Here, in the Abbey, is buried someone as special and important as you and me. He is not an ordinary forgotten person. Nobody is ordinary. We cannot, must not, call anyone *ordinary*. Here is someone important and he helps us remember. Here is the Unknown Warrior who reminds us just how wonderful and mysterious our lives and our history can be.

Follow-up questions

After reading this article, your students could debate one of these questions verbally or provide a written response for homework

- How would you describe the significance of the Grave of the Unknown Warrior?
- In what ways do commemorations and burials help us to remember the past?
- Why is it important for The Grave of the Unknown Warrior's identity to remain anonymous even till the present day?
- How does The Grave of the Unknown Warrior demonstrate our current understanding of historical events, memory, and loss?
- "We cannot, must not, call anyone ordinary." What in your opinion makes him extraordinary?