

Minister's Message, November 11, 2020

Remembrance Day

On Remembrance Day, we are asked to remember the fallen. This is the story of one soldier from the First World War, and the impact his all too short life had.

His name was Alexis Helmer, but his friends called him Lex. Lex was born in Hull, Quebec. His father Richard was a successful business owner and was mayor of Hull for one term. His father was also a senior officer in the Canadian Army. Richard and his wife Elizabeth were from Ottawa, so it was not a surprise that they moved back across the river to Ottawa when Lex was a young boy. They lived on Gilmour Street, between Elgin Street and the Rideau Canal. The family attended Dominion Methodist Church. Lex was their only son. Lex went to High School at Lisgar Collegiate. When he graduated Lex went to the Royal Military College in Kingston. After he graduated from RMC he went on to McGill University in Montreal. He got a Bachelor of Science degree in Engineering and he graduated in 1914. Dr. John McCrae was one of his teachers at McGill. Lex was engaged to be married when the First World War broke out and he carried her photo with him always. Sadly, we do not know her name. Lex volunteered and at the age of 22 was made a Lieutenant. His former teacher John McCrae was now a fellow officer.

The battle of Ypres had been raging for seventeen days and nights without a moment's quiet. The soldiers had barely slept because the bombardments never stopped. Lex was gassed more than once, and he was cited for bravery several times. On the night of Sunday, May the second, in 1915 a shell exploded right on top of Alexis Helmer. Lex was killed instantly. When one of his friends went to retrieve his body, they ended up picking up the pieces they could find and wrapped them all in a blanket. They buried him along with the badly damaged photo of his beloved fiance. There was no chaplain around, so Dr. John McCrae performed the burial ceremony for his former student and friend. The next day John McCrae wrote his famous poem for his friend Lex.

Over the course of the battle Helmer's grave was destroyed by further fighting and could not be located. Lieutenant Alexis Helmer is now commemorated on Panel 10 of the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing in Ypres. He is one of the 54,896 soldiers who have no known grave in the battlefields of the Ypres. At the end of the war, Mount Helmer on the B.C.-Alberta border was named in his honour.

Lex's father Richard was a Brigadier General in the Canadian Army stationed in Ottawa. In 1920 Richard died in the Spanish Flu Epidemic and was buried in the military section of Beechwood Cemetery. His mother Elizabeth sold their house and went to live with her sister. She continued to be a part of Dominion United Church until her death in 1957. Elizabeth was buried next to her husband Richard in Beechwood. Alexis' name is inscribed on his parents tombstone.

The poem In Flander's Fields has stuck with us, because it does not glorify war. It speaks of the pain of the conflict. It speaks of the price paid by those who fought and by those who remained.

This is for Lex.

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.

With thanks,

Rev. James Murray