

**2 Chronicles 24:16**      *They buried him among the Kings because he had done good toward God and toward his house.*

Those are the exact words inscribed on the black slab of Belgian marble that covers the tomb of the Unknown Warrior, who was buried just inside the great west door of Westminster Abbey in earth brought from Flanders almost exactly a hundred years ago on Armistice Day, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1920. *They buried him among the Kings because he had done good toward God and toward his house.* To begin with King George V had been less than keen on the idea. Two years after the Armistice had been signed he was anxious that such a poignant memorial would only bring back painful memories that people were only now beginning to lay to rest. But in fact it had the opposite effect, for with the burial of the unknown soldier, selected at random and in great secrecy from one of the battlefields of northern France, the families of all those who had been killed in action and who had no known grave felt that at last they were laying their loved one to rest, and with him all the grief and all the anguish that the war had wrought on the whole nation.

The idea first came – I’m glad to say - from an Army Chaplain, the Revd David Railton MC, who in a makeshift French graveyard in 1916 had been struck by the sight of a plain cross on which someone had written “An unknown soldier of the Black Watch”. Thus in November 1920 the body of an unknown soldier of an unknown Regiment was accorded the honours of the military funeral of a Field Marshall, the coffin, made from an oak tree that had stood in the grounds of Hampton Court Palace, pulled on a gun carriage escorted by the highest ranking military officers in the land, followed by the King himself on foot and a hundred holders of the Victoria Cross. After pausing by the Cenotaph, which was itself unveiled for the first time that morning, the gun carriage moved on to the Abbey for a simple funeral service described in the next day’s edition of the Times as “the most beautiful, the most touching and the most impressive...this island has ever seen”. Within the next few days a million people filed past the grave and a century on the tomb of the Unknown Warrior, laid so respectfully to rest under the same roof as James VI, Charles II and Mary, Queen of Scots, remains a powerful focus for the whole nation. *They buried him among the Kings because he had done good toward God and toward his house.*

I can’t help wondering if those words might have been familiar to Joseph of Arimathea, described by St Luke as a good and righteous man, a member of the Jewish council who would know his scriptures well. But he was a brave man too, who took risks recognising something of the

significance of Jesus and was allowed to bury him not among Kings but in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. Not that he would lie there long, of course, unlike the tomb of the unknown warrior it was an empty tomb that would become the focal point not just of his death but of his resurrection.

An empty tomb, that's what the word cenotaph means, that's what lies behind the great edifice Edwin Lutyens created from Portland stone, set in the heart of Whitehall and unveiled a hundred years ago just moments before the unknown warrior was covered again with the earth of Flanders fields. And just as that tomb became a focal point for so many, so it is the empty tomb of Jesus that remains the focal point for so many more, the proof of his promise that those who put their trust in him would share his resurrection life, not least those who by their service and their sacrifice have done their duty, have done good toward God and toward his house, all those represented a hundred years on by the same Unknown Warrior. *They buried him among the Kings because he had done good toward God and toward his house.* For him and for all like him, known and unknown, thanks be to God. Amen.