Marie Colvin quotes the words of Martha Gellhorn, one of the bravest war correspondents of her generation: when it comes to war “never believe governments, not any of them... keep an untrusting eye on all that they do.” Seek the truth.

Not long ago I saw a play entitled *The Two Worlds of Charlie F*. It was a play put together from stories of wounded Service personnel who had served in Afghanistan. Many of those who performed were soldiers who had lost limbs or who had been seriously physically and psychologically injured in war. The play told their stories, their reasons for signing up, leaving home, told of their family and friends, their active service, the moment of the injury, the explosion, the smell, the horror, the medical support, their return, the disorientation, the trauma, the attempts to fit in again and to cope with the on-going repercussions of their often debilitating injuries and memories. Post-traumatic stress is a terrifying thing leaving the victim frightened and alone. The collective memory and sympathy of society is often short-lived but the damage war does often lasts the whole of your life. I was struck how seldom we hear the full story of the incredible human cost of the wars which our government have decided to involve us in. Owen Sheers who wrote the drama comes to conclusions very similar. He writes: ‘I’ve realised how the basic nature of war, the fundamental destruction on a physical, psychological and emotional level has not changed very much, however modern the war may be. Most importantly working with these service men and women, has reminded me what this word war, really means and just how far the consequences of a conflict reach, across countries, people, generations.’

Most of us can’t live our lives with too much of that reality. And yet when we are watching the news on TV have we not all heard these words like: “Two British soldiers were shot dead in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan today. Their families have been informed”? And then the news presenter moves on with another story. But have we not just for a moment imagined what that informed meant?
A Marine’s Mother writes this:

On my door is a notice
Do not knock
Knock at the window

I fear the knock as do thousands of military mums
Please do not knock

At night I hear the car doors shut
Please, please, do not knock at my door

I get out of bed to see
I do not want that knock

Are you coming to our door?
Please do not knock

The only knock I want on my door
Is the surprise that my boy has come home safe
He can knock as loudly as he wants.

But until he is home, do not knock on my door.¹

Does it not seem shocking that in a world where we have learnt so much – to build skyscrapers, put astronauts on the moon, send spaceships to Mars, split the atom, travel across the world in double-decker jets, communicate with someone on the other side of the world on a mobile phone, send messages and pictures and sound at the click of a computer key – does it not seem shocking that all around the world we are still creating bombs to blow people’s limbs off, bullets to tear people open, weapons to inflict the most brutal damage upon the fragile, irreplaceable, beautiful, flesh and bones of one another? Yesterday I saw a picture of Prince Charles on a beach in Australia talking to his young son Harry in Afghanistan on a mobile phone, and I imagined what it must feel like for British families and Afghani families, and Syrians, and all those whose loved ones are in danger because of the futile destructiveness and brutality of war. And I imagined the grief of being informed of a loved one of one’s own:

A poem from *Enduring Freedom: An Afghan Anthology*

God Allows an Angel to Die

It was Tuesday
A heart stopped
At the end of your phone call.
It was so sudden.

Behind a rage of windows
A sea of faces
Prayed for your descent
Just before the collapse
Of what we all knew.

¹ *The Knock and Car Doors Shutting At Night*, Sally Ainsworth; *Enduring Freedom: An Afghan Anthology*; Munken 2011
I saw no wings
Snapshot man,
During your angel fall.²

Not only does war lead to the loss of life through death it can also lead to the nightmare of the loss of life in life. In this poem the writer describes, from his own experience, the nightmare of war and yet the greater nightmare of leaving the army, the only family he has ever had. Many former soldiers end up homeless on our streets:

Orphan by Paul Marlow

I am surrounded by loneliness, constantly seeking that hidden element that seems unobtainable, a part of myself lost.

My family gone, taken from me forcibly, the worst of my life rolled into one and disjointed throughout the years.

Jim the cock-sure boisterous brother with passion and flair, lying in my arms, broken shredded and bleeding.

Tom, the quiet one, a thinker friend to all that crossed his path. Huddled in piss, stained red, pale white, frozen to the deck.

Simon, the joker the dancing queen who shattered the cloak of moroseness about us. Alone in a room bereft with a pile of pills.

And what of me? Suicide glowers in the shadow of my past. The gun is gone, my uniform stripped away. I am locked out from a world I called home, yet still tethered. The nightmare of combat has never left me – my only source of what it felt to be loved.³

War brings us face to face with the meaning of our existence the pain the hope – our need of love. Like Jacob, we wrestle with God. And sometimes the lowest point can become the moment when the ladder to heaven opens up and the message of Christ’s love breaks in:

James Allan:
“As a soldier for 40 years facing both life and death often on a daily basis the need for Jesus Christ and the peace that only he can bring was not a theory - it is a fact which your life depends upon. They often say there are no atheists in a fox hole and I can confirm that’s true. In Iraq in 2003 I lived in a hot sticky box room in Basra airport where I shared a bunk with John who was the Royal Air Force helicopter tasking officer. We were kept together because we were responsible for

² God Allows an Angel to Die, Charlie Brown; Enduring Freedom: An Afghan Anthology; Munken 2011

³ Orphan, Paul Marlow; Enduring Freedom: An Afghan Anthology; Munken 2011
controlling the evacuation of injured and wounded personnel from accidents, bomb blasts and enemy fire. It was to this tiny claustrophobic place that I often hid away after dealing with major incidents, when sadly servicemen and women and many Iraqis were wounded or killed. Two of the most challenging trauma and evacuation incidents that I faced, involved Iraqi civilians with multiple life-threatening injuries. I can still remember us doing everything we could to stem the flow of blood. We had to find ways of extracting casualties under enemy fire, putting aircrews, infantry and medical teams into mortal danger. And when things calmed down, my team and I often had to reassure young soldiers post contact, many of them teenagers who had just seen their first dead body or heard the cries of an injured friend or been hit themselves and seen their own body torn open. I must admit, being honest with you, I was surprised how many were happy for me to pray with them. Afterwards, often after a thirty-hour day, lying sweating on a plastic mattress in the dark, I would say over and over again in my mind Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil
For you are with me
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

Today we are here to remember. We cannot simply turn away. The soldiers sent to Afghanistan have been sent in the name of our country. And the lives that they are offering are our business. Today is the day to remember the terrible cost of war and to recognise the stories of those who have put their lives at risk in the service of their country. We will remember them because our own lives and stories are inextricably linked with theirs. The longing for peace, for freedom, for justice must be the longing of all Christian people.

In today’s Gospel, Christ calls his disciples to follow him. It is a call into the action of the Gospel. The action of redemption involves us. “I will make you fish for people”; become part of God’s action of salvation. We cannot simply be bystanders. We are not called to a love that is inoperative. The Jacob’s Ladder, which has been painted by Don for the commemoration service for those who have died homeless, shows the movement of the angels of God – messengers – opening up for us a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. The deaths of those we remember confront us; confront us with our own mortality and our need for forgiveness. Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, to leave behind their securities and possessions and to become the ones who in their lives and actions are the bearers, of God’s kingdom, ‘on earth as it is heaven.’ A kingdom where “death will be no more, and there will be no more mourning and crying and pain.”

Today in this Eucharist we will celebrate Christ’s memory. Not a memory of the dead but a re-membering – a making present. We will re-member a life torn apart by violence, hatred, human prejudice, religious fanaticism and the misuse of power. But we will also remember that this broken body is also the body which gives us life and brings healing. We are part of that body, bearing its wounds and brokenness, called to remember each member of that body so that all may share the gift of Christ’s risen life – the gift of peace.

As we offer our prayers before your Cross, symbol of suffering and of reconciliation, we pray using the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

“In the Eucharist we offer the Bread, that Bread which carries all the bewilderment, the anguish, the blood, the pain, the injustice, the poverty, the hate, the anger, the fear, the death, the bombs, may we offer it all together with the perfect all-sufficient sacrifice of the Lamb without blemish, for peace, for transfiguration, and for compassion at the heart of the world.”