

Remembrance Sunday 13.11.11 2 Corinth 5:17- 6:2 John 15:9-17

What is your earliest memory? Some people claim they can remember events when they were under 1 year old – even a cat walking across their pram. Some memories will make you curl up in laughter and others will fill you with tears. Memories help to form and shape us into the people we are. It's strange how in later years it is the earliest memories that people recall whilst they can't remember what they had for dinner yesterday. I know one elderly lady of 90 who claims she no longer has a memory but a 'forgetory'.

Today we pause to remember the past that has shaped us all, to remember not our own lives but the lives of others. We pause too, to reflect on the present and we pause to look to the future.

So firstly, we pause to remember the past. Memories that are seared into our brains are often connected with death and grief. We recall with clarity the moment we heard of the death of a close relative or friend – where we were, what we said and thought and the numbness that followed. A soldier's memory of tensions, actions, uncertainties, friendships and grief at deaths in war will remain with them for life in waking and sleeping hours. We pause respectfully today to glimpse a little of the terrifying experiences of soldiers, by listening to the memory of others. One veteran visiting the Normandy beaches said, 'I shall never forget the sheer terror of that night', 'We jumped into the darkness with no idea where we would land....' It is not surprising that many who have fought to protect peace suffer from the post traumatic stress disorder: the inner battle can remain.

Places such as the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, the war cemeteries in France and the wooden crosses lined up outside Westminster Abbey are symbols to help us to remember in gratitude the sheer numbers of people who have been ready to offer themselves in life-threatening roles to allow us to live in peace. We pause today to be thankful for their love of humanity. Shortly we will all say the words of the poet Binyon – words written as he mourned the death of a friend in the 1<sup>st</sup> world war.

‘ At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.’

So we remember – we remember not only the actions, but the great qualities of service men and women too. One world war veteran who had reached the age of 109 spoke with a great spirit of generosity of those around him who had deserted, consequently been shot and then given an unnamed grave. He said that it’s time to forgive and to give them back their dignity. He bore no malice, no resentment. He spoke sympathetically of the split second when a soldier made a decision to go over the top of the trench or run away and that understandably some did desert.

We have Remembrance Sunday lest we forget those who have died – lest we forget too the horror of war. Siegfried Sassoon was one of many who wrote about preserving the memory in his poem ‘Aftermath’. It finishes with gruesome images, saying this:

‘ Do you remember that hour of din before the attack-  
And the anger, the blind compassion that seized and shook you then  
As you peered at the doomed and haggard faces of your men? Do you remember  
the stretcher cases lurching back  
With dying eyes and lolling heads – those ashen grey  
Masks of the lads who once were keen and kind?  
*Have you forgotten yet?*  
*Look up, swear by the green of the spring that you’ll not forget’.*

We watch or partake in well-timed, organised parades, we sing hymns, we say prayers, we hear the last post and we stand together in silence to show that we *haven’t* forgotten those who have died in distant or recent wars. And neither do we forget the man who said, ‘No-one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friend’. The man who urged us to remember him with actions of eating bread and drinking wine saying, ‘do this to remember me’. He died gruesomely, giving the most precious gift of all – his life. ‘How much do you love me?’ a man supposedly, asked Jesus , ‘This much’ he said, stretched out his arms wide and died. Many Christian soldiers did, and still do remember the man who

died for them, by carrying a Bible or prayer book with them when they go into war zones. There are some stories of such a Bible acting as protection against a bullet and saving a person's life.

Secondly, we pause to reflect on the present. The sacrifice of others in the past creates for us a peaceful present. Week by week in churches across the world we remember the love and self-sacrifice of Jesus – the same qualities seen in many soldiers. Such love and self sacrifice helps Christians to make sense of the present world. It is only because of the crucifixion that in the face of the ugliness and tragedy of wars, we can try to face the world. As the previous Bishop of Bradford said, 'It is only in the light of the cross and his sharing in the sorrow of it, that God dares stand before a suffering and broken world.' It is the past events, drawn into the present and acted out weekly in Holy Communion or Eucharist that helps us make sense of our present. And only then can we change our behaviour and alter the future.

Today we rightly remember the past and yet if we *only* remember the past, if we are not changed by remembering- if we carry on the next day no different from the day before, then the memory has no effect upon us. It is the present, the now, that needs to be altered by our remembering. As we remember the recent and distant wars with the ensuing deaths and the heart rending grief and as we remember the death of Jesus, drawing us with open arms towards God, we realise that we have a responsibility to ensure that those memories transform our present lives and turn us to change the future for the better on this earth.

Thirdly we reflect upon the future. The present and future can be changed by remembering those words spoken nearly 2000 years ago of Jesus, 'This is my commandment that you love one another' . As we see the images of death, as we respect and honour the dead, as we grieve for those who have died, as we see how others have loved us, we begin to realise that we too can love one another. When this commandment is obeyed it brings peace: peace to couples, peace to families, peace to large communities and peace to the wider world because the command 'to love each other' is dependent upon self sacrifice. The now, the

present can be transformed through love by the memory of the past and create a peace for the future.

There is sadly, a temptation during peaceful times to forget those who have died in war who have helped to create our peace, there is too a temptation when our lives seem to be comfortable and relatively easy, to forget the sacrifice of Jesus' death offering us all an inner peace. If we forget the past then we cannot learn, we cannot change the present nor can we hope to change our future for the better. If we forget the love and death of Jesus then we are drawn away from God into our own exile.

So we pray that we have the grace never to forget the sacrifice others have made for us, the grace to transform ourselves in the present because of those memories and the grace to accept all the future challenges as God calls out to us to 'love one another' in this broken world. Amen