

Reflection on Remembrance Sunday, 12 November 2023

by Adrian Walter, Lay Leader of Worship



Lest we forget...

There's an apocryphal story about a young priest taking his first Remembrance Day service at his first church. Afterwards, an elderly parishioner said to him, "Nice sermon, Vicar, but I'm surprised that you didn't mention the war." "Well," said the Vicar, "I didn't think it was right to talk about something that I couldn't remember because I wasn't even born when it happened." To which the parishioner replied, "Well, you're going to have a bit of a problem at Christmas then!"

We all have things that we like to remember, don't we - places we've been, events we've attended, people we've met - but when you get to a certain age you have so many memories that sometimes it's impossible to remember them all! So, I'm really grateful to Google, Amazon and Microsoft for sending collections of my photos to my smartphone

under the heading 'New memories for you', although some of these are events that I'm certain I wasn't actually at!

That's one reason why we often bring home souvenirs; a donkey with a sombrero, a fridge magnet or, in my case, a bottle of wine from a vineyard I've visited. The word 'souvenir' is a French word which originates from the Latin word 'subvenire', meaning 'comes to mind', because that is exactly what it does; when we look at it, we remember that we were at that place or festival or vineyard.

However, there's a souvenir most of us have of an event that very few of us were involved in or where even alive for at the time - the Poppy. An important reminder of the suffering and sacrifice made by ordinary men and women who gave their lives for our freedom and the freedom of others. We wear our Poppies as a souvenir, so that we bring to mind what took place on our behalf, so that we don't forget.

The Bible has a lot to say about remembering and forgetting, not least because the Israelites suffered badly with forgetfulness. The Bible tells us that, while they were slaves in Egypt, God heard their cries of desperation and chose Moses to lead the people in a great deliverance that we call the Exodus. It's an incredible story involving them safely crossing the Red Sea while Pharaoh's army is destroyed, but what's even more incredible is that the Israelites became so caught up with their 'journey in the wilderness' they forgot this miraculous escape from Egypt and sometimes even said they were better off there! That's why, when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, He

said these words: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deuteronomy 5:15). They were to 'remember' the past so that they might better understand the present and look forward to a better future. They were to remember so they wouldn't forget.

First, the Israelites were to remember what they had been. Despite Joseph, a former Hebrew slave, saving the country from starvation during a 7-year famine, 400 years after being welcomed in Egypt as friends, the Israelites had ended up slaves. A marginalised, humiliated and exploited minority ethnic group.

Second, the Israelites were to remember what happened. Moses tried to persuade Pharaoh to 'let his people go' but to no avail, so God sent 10 plagues to persuade him to think again – again to no avail. The final plague was the passing over of the Angel of Death who killed every first-born child and animal. God told His people that the only way to survive this plague was to sacrifice a perfect lamb and daub the blood on the doorposts of each of their homes and then the Angel of Death would pass over their house – this was the first Passover and the sign for the Israelites to make their escape.

Finally, the Israelites were to remember what they should be.

A few verses after telling the Israelites to remember their past, God tells them why. "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!"

(Deuteronomy 5:29). God tells them that remembering ensures that they, their children and all future generations will not forget what they could have still been had it not been for God's mercy and compassion. But they were also to remember God's promise to Abraham, the father of their race, that through [them] his offspring, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. (Genesis 26:4)

But all this happened a long time ago in a land far away so what, in 21st century Hertford, are we to remember?

Firstly, in the same way, we need to remember what we were.

Writing to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul tells us to, "...remember that at one time you were separate from Christ... dead in trespasses and sins... without hope and without God in the world." In other words, we were no different to anyone else around us, trying to live a good life without God, hoping that things will get better, and everything will be alright in the end. But the whole point about the Gospel is that the only thing we can do to give us that hope is to put our faith in Jesus. We are to remember what it is like to be hopeless.

Secondly, we need to remember what happened.

For most of us, someone told us the good news about Jesus. It might have been a parent, a friend, someone at church, at school, at work, or it might have been on our own in a quiet room. But, however it happened, it happened, and because it happened we live as changed people, full of hope, and that hope is one of the major things that sets us apart from those around us. But if you

are sitting here today thinking, "I have nothing to remember, but I would like to have..." then please speak to someone after the service.

Thirdly, we need to remember what we should be. The apostle Paul, writing to the Romans, tells us that we have been grafted into God's chosen people so that the promises that God gave to Abraham now apply to us. So, the promise that through Abraham and his children all the peoples of the world will be blessed applies to us and that's not going to happen by accident. We need to send the right message to those around us. Being a Christian in today's world isn't easy but, for us, it's not because of persecution. Our challenges are about our morals and values and priorities. It isn't easy to stand up for truth and for what is right. It can make us unpopular at school, at work, in society, even in our family, but that is exactly why we must remember what we should be, because otherwise how are those around us going to be blessed?

So, turning now to Remembrance Sunday. Some people believe that Remembrance Sunday is outdated, that as a religious observance it should no longer be practised or that it simply isn't relevant today. Some even suggest that Remembrance Sunday glorifies war. But that misses the point of Remembrance Sunday altogether.

Figures vary but during WW1 around 20 million people lost their lives, roughly 50:50 military and civilians. That was the war to end all wars yet 21 years later, in WW2, around 50 million people died, 22 million military personnel and 28 million civilians. It's sobering to be reminded that in the 20th

century alone more than 321 million people lost their lives as a result of war - without doubt, the bloodiest century in the history of the world.

And it's because of that loss of life, that it's right for us to remember what happened, remember those who fought for our freedom and it's right that we honour their sacrifice. Like the Israelites, we are to remember so we don't forget. Yet, here we are in 2023, apparently having forgotten. We still haven't learnt the lessons of history as there are over 40 wars being waged at this very moment; some, like the events in Israel and the Ukraine, are very much in the spotlight, but others go totally unreported.

Remembrance Sunday is a time when we recall those who gave themselves for us and to remember why it was that they did what they did. It's a time to remember the horror of war and vow 'never again'. It's a time to dedicate ourselves anew to living in such a way that we don't break faith with those who died to bring peace to the world. It's a time to commit ourselves, once again, to the struggle against evil - the struggle against the very things that to lead to war in the first place.

But it's also an appropriate time to take stock of our own lives, whether we're still living in a way that lives up to our calling, however long ago 'what happened' was. Are we identifiable as God's chosen people through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed? Are we working for peace at every level of society? Are we actively praying for wars to cease?

May each one of us determine, with God's help, to make this, and future Remembrance Sundays a time when we Remember what we once were, Remember what happened and Remember what we should be. We remember so we don't forget - don't forget that our mission is to take God's peace and blessing to a hurting world.

Amen