

Sermon on Remembrance Sunday, 10 November 2024 by Rev. Alan Stewart

Reading: Matthew 5. 1-12



Re-Membering

'Blood swept lands and seas of red' was, you might remember, the title of an installation at the Tower of London back in 2014 to mark the centenary of the beginning of the Great War.

The brainchild of a ceramic artist, the work consisted of 888,246 porcelain poppies, each representing a life lost in that terrible conflict.

Over the period of three months, a trickle from a turret window slowly became a sea of red as an army of volunteers planted more and more porcelain poppies. It was impossible not to be moved by the sheer scale of the human loss represented by this 'blood swept sea of red'.

At the time, the public response was extraordinary, underlining that very deep human need to remember.

In the final analysis, of course, the only appropriate response to such senselessness is silence. And in those two, short counter-cultural minutes earlier when we stood with others, to still ourselves momentarily, to stop this spinning world, we paused to reflect thoughtfully and thankfully upon the sacrifice of others; the men, women and children, armed service personnel and civilians who made these two minutes of human freedom possible. This is a time to remember the potential in every human soul for extraordinary courage and selflessness. And, equally, lest we forget, it's also a time to confess the shadow-side in each one of us which is capable of extraordinary evil and selfishness. In those two minutes of silence, we dare to look into the light and the darkness of our own souls.

Those 888,246 poppies in the former moat of the Tower of London, and the poppies that so many wear on our lapels today, symbolise the primal heartache of humanity which has been at war with itself since the jealousy of Cain first took the life of his younger brother.

There is, however, little point in wearing or planting poppies, or standing by a war memorial, or observing two minutes of silence, if it does not somehow change us; because peace, as we all know, begins with me and with you. We remember in order to learn from the past, in order to commit ourselves to a different future, where that dream of the prophet Isaiah we heard read earlier comes true; when swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks; when machine guns will be melted into hospital beds and drones deliver healthcare not bombs.

Peace always comes at a cost.

To remember is to literally re-member, put back together, reconcile something that has been dis-membered or torn apart. And that re-remembering begins with what is torn apart within us and our families and our communities. To re-member requires that each of us face hard questions about our own prejudice and insecurity. Hard questions like, 'What part do I play, consciously or unconsciously, in the absence of peace; within myself, within my family, within my community, this nation, this world?'

Hard questions like, 'Do my investments help fund the machine of war or the pursuit of peace?'

Hard questions like, 'Do I create categories of 'us' vs. 'them', whoever 'them' might be?'

The installation at the Tower, if you remember, faced some hard questions, too. Some asked, for instance, why do we only honour our own dead? Others suggested that it was just too beautiful; should it not more accurately portray the horror of that terrible war? In the debates that raged online, one blogger said something profound: 'Let's start a Remembrance Day campaign,' he wrote, 'to get people to begin a conversation with someone from a culture different to theirs'.

What might that mean for you? Beginning a conversation with someone much younger or older? Someone from a different religion, or politics, or theology, someone with different values to you?

I was born the year before The Troubles began in Northern Ireland. Growing up, I knew nothing else. I was programmed to

think of 'us' vs 'them'. Few families escaped the violence of this tribal war, and my family was no different. Aged thirteen, I crashed my brother's motorbike into a wall on the family farm, ending up in hospital with a dislocated hip. On the same night, my older brother's wife was giving birth in a different hospital to their second son. Having witnessed the birth, my brother, a member of the Ulster Constabulary, was shot and killed by an IRA gunman in the hospital car-park.

Needless to say, it tore the heart out of my family. We were never the same again. It took me years to be able to talk about it, and many more years to begin thinking about the process of forgiveness which, as we know, sets both the forgiven and the forgiver free.

To some, that gunman was a freedom-fighter; to others, a terrorist. As I stand each year since that terrible night, in those two minutes of silence, I remember my brother and I choose, sometimes through gritted teeth, to see the man who took his life, as a fellow child of God; equally loved, equally broken.

In remembering, I choose to re-member; to reconcile what has been dis-membered. This is the only way. 'An eye for an eye,' as Gandhi once said, 'and the whole world goes blind'.

If our remembering does not lead us to re-member, to change, to forgive, to reconcile, then let's not bother, let's not force the world to a two-minute standstill. Let's not pay lip service to peace.

Jesus said, 'Blessed are the peace makers, for they will be called children of God'; children who acknowledge their own prejudice and insecurity; children who somehow muster the courage to step beyond it; children who choose to look into the eyes of the

'enemy' and see the eyes of a potential friend; children who in their remembering, re-member the broken past, and through the costly work of forgiveness, build bridges and not 'blood swept lands and seas of red'.

Amen.