

## **Remembrance Sunday**

Remembrance Sunday, a day to remember, a day for memories. Memory is a very precious gift, but in itself, it is neutral, that is to say it is a vehicle to recall the past and whether or not to do so is a pleasant experience depends, of course, on what the memories are. Almost certainly even the happiest memories bring a sense of nostalgia because they recall a particular joy which can never be repeated. There may be further joys in the future which will, in their turn, become happy memories, but they can never be repeated. Have you ever had the experience of revisiting a place where you had a happy time in the past - perhaps as a child - and hoping you could recapture something of the joy you remember then? But everything has changed. The gate in the hedge, where you used to feed the horses has not simply gone, the whole field is a new housing estate. The bungalow with the pretty garden where old Mrs. Mickleberry lived has been replaced by a modern house with a BMW in the drive. That is why the gift of memory is so precious and the wonderful thing is that nothing can take memories away. Those joyful things did happen; the future may be uncertain but past joys cannot be touched.

There will be many here this morning holding onto very precious memories and I, too, have my own. But those memories are personal, I cannot share mine with you or you share yours with me. Oh we can tell each other what our memories are, but we cannot share them unless we experienced together the actual events creating those memories. So what is it we are doing today? Surely it is more than coming together to celebrate our personal and individual memories. Of course, and it is a corporate act. We are recognising that we are more than individuals with our personal histories; we belong together, we do not exist in isolation, we have a corporate and national history. So much of our culture today causes us to forget this; the individual is all important. "I have a right to my life; I have a

right to be happy.” Yes, but not at the expense of someone else. If seeking your rights deprives someone else of theirs then, for the sake of society, you must be restrained. Ah, there we have it; we belong to society, to a nation and this morning we come to celebrate our common memories, our memories as a nation; the things which have shaped us into the people we are.

But remembrance is more than memory. Memories alone do not motivate us. They may be no more than the thoughts of an old man or old woman dreaming by the fire. Remembrance is recalling the past in order to affect the future. Let me repeat that; remembrance is recalling the past in order to affect the future, and that is essential for the welfare of the human race. The Bible is full of instances where God calls his people to remember.

Remember the command that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you `The LORD your God is giving you rest and has granted you this land.' [Josh 1:13]

If we understand that aright it has tremendous meaning for us today. Land belongs to God not to us. In the so-called Great War of 1914-18 and again in the Second World War, we were fighting to stop Germany occupying land that belonged to other nations, including our own. But whatever love we have for our land, however strenuously we fight to keep it, we need to remember that it belongs to God who may give it to whom he will. It is because nations forget this that there are wars. While we may condemn other nations for their attempts to acquire the land of others we need to remember that much of the resentment of the Irish, the Scots and the Welsh and their desire to govern themselves is due, even to this day, to the English taking their land, albeit many years ago; in the case of Wales it involves what many of them see as stealing their language also. And a further point is that while God may, in his generosity, give land to this nation or that; we are all stewards only; it still belongs to God. This is why ‘green’ issues and ecology are so important, or

should be so important, to the Christian. That is one point we should 'remember' as today we recall the past in order to affect the future.

Another thing the Bible calls God's people to remember, Moses said:

Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when he said to me, "Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children." [Deu 4:10]

A century or more ago it was said of this nation, "It is the land of a book, and that book is the Bible." I do not pretend that everything this nation did in the past, and particularly at the time when we ruled an empire, was totally good - we know better than that these days, we were guilty of exploiting other nations for our own prosperity. However, there was a moral standard, a common acceptance that certain things were right and other things were wrong. Oh, people still chose to do the wrong, but it was generally acknowledged that it *was* wrong. Now there are few such standards; people do not lie, they are economical with the truth; they are not wrong, they have a different viewpoint; and our children have no clear indication of what is right and wrong. Perhaps you will not agree with me, but I believe much of the problem is that we have neglected the Word of God and failed to instruct our children in the ways of the Lord. We have not remembered to "assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children."

There is something else the Bible tells us to remember, and let me say that in speaking of these Biblical commands I am not simply making use of the opportunity to ride my personal hobby horses;

they have a direct bearing on what we are about on this Remembrance Sunday as I will show in a moment.

Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. [Deu 24:17/18]

When God set the Jews free from their slavery in Egypt and gave them their own land, he instructed them to care for those in need, not just their own people, but aliens also. His argument was this: “you know what it is like to be oppressed, to have no rights. So, now that you have the opportunity to treat others in the way you were treated, don’t! Break the cycle of tit-for-tat, of revenge. Remember you were slaves, and the Lord set you free. That is why I command you to behave differently towards other people in need”

There are many other instances in Scripture where the Lord called his people to remember something in the past so that it will affect their behaviour in the future, and I will share just one more with you in a moment; but do you see how it all has a bearing on what we are doing today, on this Remembrance Sunday? Surely it must be more than saying, “Oh yes, we recall those who gave their lives in two world wars.” That may be no more than our personal memories of our individual loved ones. It must be more than that. What did they die *for*? It has been rightly said that they gave up their future so that we might have one. But if they could see what we have made of that future, what would they think looking at our world today? Would they think it was worth them giving their lives for it? And, anyway, things have changed radically. When Armistice Day was first inaugurated it was to remember the men (and it was only men in those days - you rarely, if ever, find any women’s names on the war memorials throughout the country) to remember the men who had died in the

forces. But today, would we not want to remember the members of the Manhattan fire service who were going up the stairs of the twin towers, helping people coming down, when the towers collapsed? Did they not give their lives to save others as much as anyone who died in the trenches of Flanders?

We need to recall the purpose of remembrance - to recall the past so that it may affect the future, or, more particularly, affect how we live our lives today.

And so, as I draw to a close, let me share one more instruction from Scripture, to remember. It was on the last night that Jesus spent on earth in his natural body.

He took bread and broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, "This is my body, do this in remembrance of me."  
[Luke 22:19]

and then he poured out wine and gave it to them.

There can be no doubt that these were symbols of his death - his body broken on the cross and his blood poured out by the nails and the thrust of the spear into his side. I do not want anyone to doubt that I believe that. As Paul explains to the Corinthians:

Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. [1 Cor 11:26]

However, Jesus told us to do this in remembrance of him, the whole person he was and is, not just his death. We are to remember this wonderful man who lived selflessly for the well-being of the whole human society. He cared for the poor, for the destitute, the hungry, the homeless, the deprived, the sick, and the forgotten. When people reviled him, he didn't hit back or take revenge. Above all, he forgave. And he invited everyone to follow him. It was to those who responded to that invitation that he gave this memorial of the bread and wine in Holy Communion and said - "Do this in remembrance of me."

It means so much more than just thinking of the fact that Jesus died for us. It is tied up with this matter of recalling the past so that we may affect the future. It is calling us to continue the work which he began, the work of transforming society. We have seen that the purpose of holding Remembrance Sunday is to recall not merely that so many died to give us a future, but that that future might be worth their sacrifice. That is why Jesus died. Not just so that we might go on living in the same old way, but that we might live as God originally intended that we should live, caring for his creation and living in harmony with him and with each other.

I greatly value our services in modern language. Having spent some 24 years working on two large council housing estates, I am glad that I had something other than Elizabethan English to offer. However, I was brought up on the Old Prayer Book and I still value it. Let me remind you of the words in the 1662 Communion Service as the minister invites people to come to receive the sacrament, first confessing their sins.

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith and take this holy Sacrament...

If we understand what remembrance means and we allow our remembrance of Jesus to affect the way we will live from henceforth, then he did not die in vain.

In the same way (but to a far lesser degree, for their sacrifice can never grant us redemption and forgiveness of our sins) if our remembrance of those who died to give us a better future affects that future by the way we conduct ourselves, they too will not have died in vain.

But if this day is nothing more than personal nostalgia, a memory of someone we knew and loved personally, however deep that love may be, we do not need a Remembrance Day for that; surely we love them and have our precious memories of them always. The point is, does our remembrance, the corporate remembrance of our whole nation, cause us to determine to create a better world? And for us who claim to follow Christ, does it inspire us if it does can Remembrance Day have significance.