Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 12th November 2023

Readings: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Remembrance Sunday

> Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died (1 Thessalonians 4:14)

Today is Remembrance Sunday. I want to think for a few moments this morning about remembrance. How many of you can remember the Second World War? I can - just, but I remember the immediate post-War period much better. I only have to think about my age, to realise that the overwhelming majority of the population of this country have no direct memory of the war at all. What then does it mean to remember? What are *we* remembering? Interestingly Lawrence Binyon wrote his poem, *For the Fallen* when the First World War was only eight weeks old. People's exact memories are really something of a mystery. One day when I was a research student - and that was over fifty years ago now - I found myself in Whitehall in the week of Remembrance Sunday; and out of curiosity I looked at some of the wreaths and flowers around the Cenotaph; I was astonished to find one bouquet 'in memory of my beloved cat', signed with a woman's name. I was thinking about it on the train journey home and decided that perhaps this made the act of remembering real for her, substituting something real and loved for what would otherwise be completely abstract.

Yet there are times when a community, or at least some of its members, come together to remember a particular serviceman, particularly if he (and it usually is he) dies alone. To take two examples from East Anglia in the last ten weeks; at the end of September, bikers in Felixstowe provided a guard of honour for a 90-year-old veteran of the Suffolk Regiment in which he had served for twelve years, who was due to have no family members at his funeral; a few weeks later, another 98-year-old man, a veteran RAF pilot of WW2, had members of the local British Legion turn out for his funeral, again in the absence of family members. Contrary to our normal practice, private grief is translated into public grief, as a community's act of respect. Actually, the idea that funerals are essentially private is relatively recent; in the late 1950s I travelled in a funeral procession for the first time at my grandmother's funeral and I was moved by seeing a man raise his hat as the hearse passed by him. In both World Wars, the scale on which a national war affected the wider population was totally changed from previous centuries; and another manifestation of that is the number of war memorials that were erected, and particularly the number of names to be found on them. On one occasion when I was in Canada, I came across an abandoned mining village, where almost all houses and the mine itself had disappeared; what did remain was a small war memorial for the First World War. I found it intensely moving. You can search our villages, towns, and churches in vain for comparable evidence before the nineteenth century.

Memory plays an important part in Christian theology and tradition; it is at the heart of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. And it does in life more generally. One of the particularly disabling aspects of dementia is the loss of memory, partial or total, that so often accompanies it. If we lose our memories, we lose a vital part of what holds us together, both as individuals and as a community. This is one reason why historians have such a responsible role. We need to beware of selective memory or remembering, something we all know from everyday life. One good example of that is the way in which civilian deaths are not usually noted on First World War memorials, but are often, though not invariably, noted on Second World War ones. Nowadays that omission is often being remedied retrospectively. The Westminster College war memorial notes the name of a German student from the 1930s, and not only those from the UK and Commonwealth. Other Colleges have faced the same issue and resolved it in various ways, not usually by omitting the names of college members completely according to which side they were on.

The significance of memory in reflected in today's readings from scripture. Joshua 24 is the last chapter of the book in which we are told that Joshua gathered the People of Israel at Shechem by Mount Gerizim, at the end of their entry into the Holy Land and reminded them of Abraham's initial journey from Ur and everything that had followed. He emphasised the importance of maintaining the Covenant God had made with them, and they renewed the Covenant that day. Paul, writing to the

Church at Thessalonica about the Coming of the Lord, emphasised that those who had not died would still be raised because the power of the Resurrection was extended to all. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus's parable of the ten bridesmaids, or the wise and foolish virgins, is a call to stay awake and be ready for the end, when it comes - at a time we do not expect.

There is, however, another problem with memory. It is often said, particularly among historians, that history is written by the winners. In extreme cases this results in the complete omission of any reference to particular nations, peoples or groups. There is a book called, *Silencing the past*, by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1949-2012), a Haitian scholar working in the USA, which describes in meticulous detail how western historians have ignored the history of his country, the scene of the only successful slave rebellion in modern history (1791-1804). William Wordsworth wrote a sonnet in 1802, *To Toussaint L'Ouverture*, one of the leaders of the revolt, who was captured and imprisoned in France by the French government when the sonnet was written, with its memorable lines:

> Though fallen thyself, never to rise again,
> live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
> powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
> there's not a breathing of the common wind
> that will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
> thy friends are exultations, agonies,
> and love, and man's unconquerable mind.

If, like me, you had to do it for English Literature A-level, you may remember it; otherwise I doubt it.

It is inevitable that different events are remembered in different places. I remember attending a meeting at a conference-centre in the far north of Germany, a few miles from the Danish border at Breklum. Visiting the local churchyard one afternoon my attention was caught by rows of identical crosses in one section. On most there was a name, a date, and one word - 'Stalingrad'. This was the battle of 1942-43 when, partly because of Hitler's attempt to direct the course of the battle in person, the USSR was enabled to fight off the Nazi siege. There were nearly 2m casualties altogether, and it was a, if not *the*, turning point in the War. Even here though the UK suffers from selective memory. I was born during the Battle of Stalingrad, but I never remember it being mentioned in my childhood, or the accounts I heard of the Second World War; our minds were focused on Montgomery's desert war and the later invasion of Italy.

In the 1980s I began to wonder how long we could continue to mark Remembrance Sunday meaningfully. I didn't want it to become like Memorial Day in the USA (a general commemoration of the armed forces), because it had a particular meaning for us, but when no one could remember anything meaningfully, what sense did it make? However, after representing the United Reformed Church as Moderator of General Assembly at the Cenotaph in 1996 and 1997 I became convinced that it was unrealistic to suppose that the Remembrance Sunday service in Whitehall would be abandoned at the end of the century, as I had hoped, and certainly not while the Queen was alive. But my question about its meaning remains. Furthermore, when I went with the Eastern and Thames North ministers' spring school a few years ago to visit the Western Front battlefields of the First World War, we visited Ypres (Wypers) and on one evening the Menin Gate. This Gate was built by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission at the beginning of the road to the battlefields to remember those Missing from 1914 to 1918. The Last Post and Reveille have been played daily since 1928 at 8.00 pm (except during WW2). As a military spectacle it was not impressive when we were there; but in a curious sense the rather ramshackle performance that evening was a more powerful testimony to the reality of war than a polished military spectacle. Rituals can sometimes be more effective than words in conveying memory; and it was clear what was being remembered. 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them,' which I suspect is why The Last Post comes first. Prayers for the dead became irresistible during the First World War, as the hopelessness of the 'eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' philosophy was exposed. The world has not been the same since, but sadly not everyone has noticed and in some places we might just as well be living in the stone age. In *Thought for the Day* on Radio 4 on 1 November, Lucy Winkett made a simple but significant point when she observed that we should perhaps not remember those who died in the World Wars so much for how they died as for how they lived. Reveille points to the future, and to resurrection.

DMT, 12th November 2023