

Sermon for Remembrance Day
Rev David Howells

Sunday 13th November 2011
Grace Church in Scarborough

Why do we remember? And what do we remember for?

We remember partly because things trip us up, pulling us backwards in time, often painfully, to recall someone we loved and lost. It is on birthdays, Christmas time, at the smell of fresh bread or the sound of a waterfall. It can be when the weather turns towards winter and the season is full of endings, or, like today, when the poppies are worn, a part of the past comes back to us.

We also remember intentionally. We can make an effort to recall someone or something. Each week in church we hear Jesus say, "Do this in remembrance of me."

To re-member is to give parts, legs and arms, heart and soul, reality and present context. Remembrance is not just saying "Oh, yes, I remember.." and then going on and drifting away from that memory. It is to pause, to ponder and reflect, and to think. For St Paul it was about living in the daylight of attention rather than in the undisciplined mind of sleep or drugs. It is about living "mindfully" as the Buddhists wisely teach us. In this sense to remember a person is to bring them back fully to mind. It is to recall the turn of phrase, the angle of the head, the humour and the kindness, the darkness and the troubles; all of it. And the context.

When we remember warfare in truth, it is not just heroism and victory, but also brutality, boredom, terror and the dreadful, stupid waste of life. And it is the selfless acts, the moments of astounding courage. It is personal goodness breaking out repeatedly in a place of strident evil and the failure of humanity.

To remember is not merely to repeat, but to learn from the past. It has been said that we should fight war itself, not wars after wars. Those who gave their lives did so in the belief that they would bring about a better, fairer, more peaceful world. Every time we send troops off to fight we deny our dead their hope. We squander their blood when we do not ceaselessly work for peace, and the justice from which peace springs.

When we hear, in the eucharist, "Do this in remembrance of me." It is an invitation to make a new world, to build the kingdom of heaven upon earth, where the swords are beaten into ploughshares and the poor are lifted up, the mighty are cast down and "each one may sit beneath their vine or fig tree at peace and unafraid."

To remember is to grow wiser. It is hard to grow wise alone! To be more than you alone can be, you need the wisdom and stories of those who have lived this life before you. We learn from their mistakes and from their successes. Mothers and fathers who sat down each evening with children around a small kitchen table for supper and conversation together have much to teach a hurried, wired, electric

world. To know that happiness is found in effort and self-giving can be seen in hindsight, if you were lucky enough to have such a family to grow up in. To discover that faith in God is not a foolish anachronism, can be learned by looking to the lives of those who were holy before us.

And remembrance is to bring history in a desired direction, a better direction. The parable of the talents tells us we don't just get our lives to sit on them, but to do something for God with them. We were not given freedom just to enjoy it, but to make it grow for others. That means fair trade, sharing our nations wealth, a bias towards freedom and justice among foreign governments, and asking our government to pursue foreign policies which enhance the lives of others rather than bettering the lives of those at home. We are called to build the kingdom of heaven on earth, all over it, not just in our own private corner.

To remember, as a disciple of Jesus, is serious work. It means to lift up into God's presence those you remember in love. It is to be done with great honesty. And it is to be done with a sense of responsibility. For who and what we are is drawn from who went before us. They have passed a torch to us and we must carry it forward. But in Christ we carry forward only the Christ-like parts. We are called to discern. We are to carry forward the dignity and the gentleness, the courage and the sacrifice, the longing for justice and the hunger for peace, and above all the vision of a better life for all people. We are called to pick up the torch to make of this world a world of which our God would be proud.

Oscar Wilde said that Christmas should be celebrated soberly every day, not drunkenly once a year. So remembrance is to be done faithfully all through the year, not dolefully once a year in November, shivering around a cenotaph in a chilling wind.

Nevertheless, today, as a reminder and a time of recommitment, we shall remember them. So every day, at the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.