

Remembrance

Readings: Isaiah Chapter 2 vv 2-5 ; Matthew Chapter 5 vv 1-11

For many people Remembrance Sunday is a time of pain. They remember the loss of someone they loved, not only in the 1st WW but in the conflicts which have followed ever since. Remembrance Sunday poses the question “ Will it ever end?” And, part of the answer to that question lies in remembering.

1. We remember in order to learn from the past.

Someone once said that if we don't learn from the past we are doomed to repeat it. And the WW2 provides an excellent example of how to avoid this... The 1st WW ended with the Treaty of Versailles. That Treaty was designed to humiliate a beaten enemy. The Germans were forced to pay huge sums by way of reparation and that fuelled a sense of grievance on which Hitler capitalised when he came to power. Another World War became inevitable.

At the end of the 2nd WW the allies acted differently. Instead of grinding a beaten foe into the ground they instituted the Marshall Plan so that a crippled economy could be rebuilt. Doing that ensured that the enemy would become an ally. They eliminated any sense of injustice and grievance which could fester in the future. The allies had remembered – and learned from the past.

2. We remember in order to forgive but not forget.

So many people say that we must “forgive and forget”. It's a very glib saying and it isn't true. It is quite impossible to forget. Its not like hitting the 'delete' button on the computer. No way in which you simply erase from the memory the pain and suffering and trauma of war. And, even if you could forget it would be the wrong thing to do.

Forgiving is another thing altogether. We often think of forgiveness in purely emotional terms. It isn't primarily emotional. Forgiveness is a volitional thing first and foremost. We decide to forgive! And that's a very hard thing to do. It means that we are prepared to draw a line under the past and refuse to allow what happened in the past to dictate your actions now and in the future. The memory persists but forgiveness means it does not poison the present.

Such forgiveness is not easy but it can be done. Nelson Mandela provides a great example. Nothing will ever make him forget the years of imprisonment on Robben Island or the indignities he suffered. But he realised that there was no future for him or his country if memory results in endless recrimination or retribution. So he drew a line under the past and put all his energies into rebuilding a society which he hoped would be free from the prejudices and injustices he suffered.

On the other hand in the Middle East and Europe the memory of the past is carried over into the present and the future with no attempt at forgiveness. The hostility between Jew and Arab goes back thousands of years. In Ireland the hostility between Catholic and Protestant goes back hundreds of years. The ancient grievances and injustices fuel present attitudes and the conflict persists. It is ironic that “Apprentice Boys” (none of whom is under 60 yrs old) still insist on marching in memory of ancient conflicts and such marches are simply provocative. They keep alive the hatreds of the past. Nobody is prepared to say “Enough is enough”. Nobody is prepared to draw a line under the past. And so the ancient feud persists.

We can't forget. But we can forgive. And we remember in order to do so. You cant forgive something you have forgotten.

3. We remember the words of Scripture.

This gives an added dimension to Remembrance Sunday. It sets it in a Christian context. We make no apology for doing that. Remember the words of Isaiah. He pictures Jerusalem, the City of God set high above the surrounding countryside. At its heart the Temple; the dwelling place of God. And, in his mind's eye he sees the nations streaming towards the city "Come let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob". - Why?

"That he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths".

The end result of that pilgrimage is that men "would beat their swords into ploughshares, their spears into pruning hooks and study war no more". Peace is the consequence of Worship!! For to worship rightly is to have our minds nourished by His truth, our imaginations purified by His beauty, our will orientated around His will. It is to love God. And no-one who truly loves God can hate his brother at the same time.

Exactly the same truth lies behind the Christmas story of the Shepherds coming to the manger. They heard a song whilst out in the fields keeping watch over their sheep. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth Peace."

Peace is the outcome of worship; of giving "glory to God".

Others might decry this worship component of Peace. Christians must insist on it else we are selling the Faith short. Peace does not merely come from Conferences, compromise agreements, initiating treaties and deploying peace-keeping forces around the world. We do not belittle these efforts. They are necessary. But they do not guarantee a durable peace.

So we remember today. In order to learn from the past, in order to forgive when we cannot forget. We come to the House of the Lord to remember and here we are taught His ways and learn to walk in His paths.

As a result...

Men will beat their swords into ploughshares, their spears into pruning hooks, their ballistic missiles into appropriate technology and study war no more.