

Homily: Remembrance Sunday, 8 November 2020

Today is Remembrance Sunday. Memories are very important to us. They give a form of stability to our lives. We all want the ability to keep what we have learnt in our minds so that we can call it up again for use later on.

What we remember in this way may be words, figures, dates, poetry or events in our lives and even skilled actions like playing the piano or riding a bicycle. Nothing that has been learnt is ever completely forgotten. It is always lurking in the mind and even if you can't recall it when you want, it will often pop up when you're not worrying about it any more.

But in something so vast and important as two World Wars, trying to see things in a new light is not always enough. We may need to bring back memories through prayer to the healing power of Christ. And such is a Remembrance service.

Remembrance, recollection was so important to the early Christians. They were called upon to express what was at the heart of their faith. Says Paul, "First and foremost I handed on to you the tradition I had received; that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised to life on the third day" - 1 Cor: 15.

So the early Christians looked back in hope to those circumstances through which they believed Israel's God had revealed his salvation. And that in the eyes of all it would be seen that he had vindicated his people. Through the New Testament they believed that Israel's God had done just that.

I have chosen a verse from Luke to think about, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled....Do you think I have come to bring peace to earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." This verse can come as a surprise to us. We are used to thinking of Jesus and the Holy Spirit as the bringers of peace. But the Gospel does not bypass the darker things. It integrates falling and failure. Jesus did not come on a message of peace as a description of his role. He came on a mission that would split families and friends. He came to witness to God's truth. But this witness was a cause of division and would result in massive suffering for Jesus and those who listened to him. Think of the terrible consequences of rejection for the persecuted church in today's world.

Today is a day we are asked to think about war and sacrifice and especially about the sacrifices of men and women who gave us their youth, their health, or in too many cases their lives for freedom. Some, particularly in the 1st and 2nd World Wars were motivated by idealism. But the reality of war is complicated.

The ministry of Jesus was often thought of in military terms. The Messiah was thought of by the Israelites as a military leader provided by God to lead the people of Israel against their enemies, to defeat them and to re-establish the glorious kingdom of David and Solomon. That was the popular view.

But Jesus saw his role differently. During the temptations he specifically rejected this version of his ministry. And as a consequence continued in a lonely battle against Satan until 3 o'clock on the afternoon of the first Good Friday. The whole of the ministry of Jesus can be seen in this light. So Jesus' campaign is against the power of evil.

All warfare carries a huge cost in suffering and death. But we can fairly say that no human cause can succeed unless its supporters are prepared to give their lives for it. Jesus gave his disciples a warning that the Gospel would make the same demands on them. First though, it made demands on Jesus himself. Jesus travelled to Jerusalem on a journey that could only end in death.

By carrying his campaign against evil to Jerusalem Jesus was ensuring a point of conflict, but he was not on a suicide mission. The Jewish political and religious leaders could have embraced the changes that God, through Jesus, was demanding. If they had done so, there would have been no Good Friday.

As it was, Jesus offered them a choice: obedience to God or be left to their own devices. They rejected Jesus, his message, his ministry, and the God who sent him. As a result Jesus was betrayed, arrested, mocked and beaten. For three hours he died slowly in an agony we can barely grasp. We believe that Jesus was obeying God when he allowed his enemies to nail him to the cross. In the garden his faith had been sorely tested. Despite that he went to his death in obedience to God's will. The same is true of those men and women we remember today. They obeyed their commanding officers and their obedience led them into extreme danger.

As Christians, we know that death was not the end of the story of Jesus. We believe that the same is true of those we remember today, just as we believe that will be true of us. Let us then on this Remembrance Sunday thank God for the sacrifice of the men and women who died or were badly injured to protect our freedom.

But let us also never forget to thank God for Jesus whose sacrifice bought all our freedoms.

Revd Anne Hoad