

2023-11-12 ... 10.50 Remembrance Sunday Service Sermon ... Revd Donna Broadbent-Kelly  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday before Advent

**Memory is an interesting thing.** Think back to some of your earliest memories. Some will be quite vivid, others will not and we might struggle to understand why particular events or scenes are so etched into our consciousness. Memory is not always neat and logical, but it enables us to see beyond the immediate – the memory of a good holiday might cheer us upon a particularly grey and overcast day; memories of friends and loved ones enable us to continue and develop our relationship when we see them again. Imagine how strange it would feel if every time we met people we had to learn again who they are and what they were like.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is written at a particularly dark and difficult moment in his life. He tells us elsewhere that he is not even sure if he will be spared for many more days; he is imprisoned, and expecting execution. Yet he describes his state of mind as one of thankfulness, joy and confidence. This is not because of his immediate circumstances but his capacity to remember. He remembers the care and affection of his friends in Philippi, he remembers the things God has been doing in and through them, he remembers their common purpose of sharing the Gospel, and he remembers that God will be with him no matter what.

There were perhaps other remembrances which came to Paul's mind as he sat in chains.

There would once have been a time when he would have been delighted to see a Christian activist condemned and imprisoned. We first meet Paul in the book of Acts, not as a Christian Missionary but as a persecutor of the church. As he reflected on his own condition, he must have realised the suffering and injustice that he was once the cause of. Sometimes our acts of remembrance are tinged with a sense of guilt, wondering if we could have done more, wishing we might have made more of our parting, or perhaps even feeling guilty that we have survived when others haven't.

When we read Paul's letters, he has much to say about God's grace, mercy and forgiveness. Had he not been able to grasp this lavish expression of God's nature, then he would never have been able to be such an energetic and active member of the Christian Community. The first lesson that Paul had to learn about God was that He was a God of forgiveness, a God who could offer healing, restoration and a new start. Perhaps we too might sometimes struggle to remember, because our own acts of remembrance are tinged with a sense of guilt. God invites us to remember so that He can embrace us with His love and mercy, release us from our sense of guilt, because in Christ, He has taken upon Himself the cost of our mistakes and disappointments.

And yet, sometimes we still prefer not to remember. Blanking out particularly traumatic memories is one of the ways our human minds cope with some of the unpleasant things that happen to people. But even when we have the capacity to remember, we sometimes prefer not to – believing that if we can somehow blank out the memories, then we can blank out the pain of what we have lost, or seen. But memory is a gift to us, it is that part of a loved one or friends that can never be taken from us, our memories of them are safe and can be drawn on as part of the healing process.

But remembering can also be a dangerous thing if we allow ourselves to only remember the things that were nice or good, or gave us a sense of pride. The nostalgia of the make do and mend years, the songs of victory and celebration of hope, the stories of community and victory. The harsh realities of war shouldn't be far from any good memories that we hold. We might see those who have fought in combat as heroes, and yes many are, in my own family my great grandfather was mentioned in dispatches for great bravery. But I often think we need to consider what did they lose in fighting in war? – as we know now many people who return home from war are traumatised, distressed and suffer tremendously through what they have suffered. Some come back with life changing disabilities, the battle scars that aren't magically restored by picking up a health kit or a flashing heart like in the computer games. Others lose their lives, there is only one life in the real world ... once it's gone the game doesn't start again.

Most of us gathered here in this room, have been so protected from the horrors of war that a day like today seems more like a ceremony than a reminder of harsh reality. The numbers overwhelm us. And when we do see the images of war, the still photos from long ago and the ones taken today, frequently, we only use our eyes. We forget about the other senses. When I think about war, I think first about the noise. By the time the images make it to us, **PTO**

someone has digitally altered the volume of the blasts and the clackety clack of the rounds of bullets to make it more palatable to our sensitive ears. And I think about the smell. The sweat. The rubbish rotting in the sun or the dank smell of soil so wet it seems it will never dry. The smell of blood. The smell of one's living flesh beginning its journey back into the earth. And the smell of fear. I have no doubt that the soldiers experienced a heartrate that we would find shocking and an acuteness in their senses we can't even imagine. Every whisper of the wind or movement of a blade of grass registers in their ears because their ability to hear it may mean the difference between death and life.

And when I think about war, I think about the parents, the mothers who did what I cannot ever even imagine being willing to do – waving goodbye to their children not knowing if they would ever see them again. And then spending night after night, month after month, year after year, waiting for the knock on the door, the sober faces on the doorstep, the black edged telegram that would blast a hole through their hearts and lives.

These scenarios, these scenes of war are not either modern or ancient, but they are eternal. No matter the year, no matter the battle, young men and women are trained to defend us, to fight for something that seems right and just and in doing so, they are sent to a far-away land, willing to lay their lives on the line. Humanity has been fighting over borders, over land, over resources, over egos and over religion since the beginning of time. Humans want what they don't have and the impulse is always to fight for it. Sometimes, when war is at its best, if there can be such a thing, sometimes others step in to help defend the weak and to defeat the strong. And in order to do so, it would appear that there is no choice BUT to fight.

Wilfred Owen wrote – '*Dulce et decorum Est pro patria mori – it is sweet and right to die for one's country*' no it is not – as Christians we are called to love our neighbours as ourselves, if we remember the love God has for us, then we know that raging pain and war against another is not a sweet thing. The suffering of those who have been to war will not be remembered as sweet.

The poppy is a symbol of our remembering, and today it is an important symbol worn of reverence and respect. When we get home most of us will put our poppies in a draw somewhere or even in the recycling bin, so I want to ask of us the bigger question – what will you do, what will I do with our remembering after today? Will we put our remembering away until next year too? Will we just disregard it, well we have done our duty for this year – when next year we will get it out again? For some of us here that isn't what will happen because for some of us the remembering is more personal, because with it is mourning – the mourning at the loss of a loved one, or remembering of a loved one who is currently in service to the Army or Navy, or because they are living with the consequences of war.

Remembering might not always be easy, that's why people for generations have come together in acts of remembrance, supporting and helping one another in the struggle and need. But let us use the memories of the past to find God in the present. Let's not be afraid to shed the odd tear, or even express our anger and despair to God – He does not demand of us that we come to him in a state of polite composure – we are called just as we are. Through remembering, sharing our stories, laughing and crying together we will find the strength for each new day's challenge and to strive for peace in our homes, communities and world.

Remembering our loved ones, those who died, remembering the true horrors of war might be painful and uncomfortable, but forgetting them or allowing others to forget would be a far greater tragedy. So as we share this act of remembrance let us pray that by God's grace we might reach that place where like Paul, we can look back and say – I thank my God, every time I remember you.

Amen.