

Sunday 11 November 2007: Remembrance Sunday

Remembrance

Readings: 2 Thessalonians 2. 1-15, 13-end; Luke 20. 27-38

When I returned to the UK exactly two years ago after 17 years on the other side of the world, I carried with me one suitcase of possessions. At the mission debriefing I went through I remember the counsellor saying to me that “you have very few visible symbols of your existence”. I asked her what she meant. She said that most people accumulate signs or symbols of what they have done in their lives. They would be able to show a house they were part way towards buying, or a car, a bank account, or property or a family, children, grandchildren. “Yes”, I said defensively, “that’s true. But I do have memories of what I’ve done and all that I have experienced.” The more I thought about it the more I saw how important those memories were and that they were not something you could just put down and leave behind but in fact carried with you, they made you who you were – all of it, the beautiful bits and the wounds, the blessings and moments of grace, and all the bits you regretted and wished if only you’d done differently. Those memories could lock you in the past but they could also flow into your present and future. And the most vital of those memories were those which connected you with people loved, memories of relationships which could cross time and space and lived on in the heart and were still felt in your guts. These memories were living relationships; they gave you life.

How powerful memories are. They can be awakened by a smell. This autumn I come out and catch in the throat that smell, that cold of early evening and I can remember so vividly walking home from school, the street lights, skipping the cracks in the pavement slabs, the car headlights, winter nights drawing in, the slight fear of the darkness and yet the excitement of a child waiting for Christmas; a sound or a tune or a song which awakens a time in your life and fills you for a moment with the same feelings of your past. There are so many triggers of memory: a photograph or a phone call, a letter, or a meeting with a friend which suddenly brings alive that rush of the past and reconnects your life, resonates and gives your life its shape and pattern and connectedness rather than seeming just a random stream of chance events. And of course memory is not simply something of the mind, the body itself has a kind of memory – look at the way birds and fish can find their way to distant places, and our own senses and bodily intuition awaken us to the sources of our own life. Our memories are our identity and the way we shape and make meaning of all that we are. These memories connect us with those around us and with time and place. And when through old age we become less sure of our memory it is then we need the memories of those who love us and the love of God to hold onto the dignity of all that we are and all that we have been.

It is easy to become deaf or blind to the memories of others. I remember the two weeks I spent filling in as a Chaplain for a large community of elderly sisters in an English convent in Whitby. On my first day preaching I had wondered if they had heard or understood a word I was saying. At the end I enquired of one of the older sisters “Were you able to follow what I was saying yesterday?” “Of course we were able to follow it. Do you realise” she said, “that among that congregation there were missionaries, nurses, educationalists, radicals, and sixteen former head mistresses!” I later realised that many had minds as sharp as razors and was kept very much on my toes. What a wonderful wealth of human experience that I had almost overlooked. Over the next few weeks I delighted in hearing just some of their stories. One old sister who seemed a little vague became my favourite and came most afternoons to tell me wonderful stories of her life and experiences. “I have just come back from a holiday with some friends in France”, she told me. “My life there was quite Bohemian. Often we didn’t

eat until 10 O'clock at night!" The mind boggles. I loved her immediately because of those stories.

But memories can also be denied. I remember hearing a few stories about when my Grandfather came home from the trenches in the First World War. They related to small domestic details of homecoming. "We had to get the leeches out of the hems of his clothes by heating them over a lighted candle." He told us in the trenches there was a rat that lived in his hat and which he could never bring himself to kill. He had a terrible time... lost most of his friends. He never wanted to talk about it. Had to fight face to face. Fasten a bayonet. It was a terrible time. Right at the end of his life one of my great uncles was persuaded to write down some of his memories of the trenches. He wrote that he remembered being in a trench all night waiting for morning and only when the sun came up realising he was standing on a human body. Remember the words of the song "When they ask us, and they're certainly going to ask us... we'll never tell them, oh we'll never tell them, there was a fight but damned if we knew where."

Perhaps it is right that stories of war and violence and death should be allowed to rest in peace. But that is just the point, many of these stories do not rest in peace, they continue to trouble us and is it not right that they should do so? And if we repress those stories we deny our own history. Two weeks I attended an asylum tribunal where the plaintiff's story, which told of the tragic loss of her own daughter, was being challenged and its authenticity denied by a Home Office lawyer. This mother began to weep uncontrollably "But she was my daughter, my daughter..."

If our memories are not heard and believed then our whole personhood is denied. That's what those who deny the holocaust are doing: as though the horror of the gas chambers was not enough, now they seek to abolish the memory of the murdered. As I write this there is a story on the news of how many many American Servicemen coming home from first Vietnam and now Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from Post Traumatic Stress and have become homeless. Many feel their stories are never honoured or heard... A few months ago we heard the story on the news of how little the casualties and the wounded from Iraq and Afghanistan were being acknowledged or honoured in the UK. The government was accused of playing things down. Because of the unease about the war no one wanted to celebrate the stories of those our nation sent. We may be justifiably uneasy about jingoism or a kind of blind patriotism that encourages militarism but if we never hear these stories how can we ever find peace? "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it". Plato said "learning is a process of remembering."

In our Gospel today Jesus is asked quite a convoluted and impossible question about what happens to us when someone dies and the complexities of who we will be married to in the afterlife. It reminds me of one of those questions at a discussion group where the framing of the question seems to be tying the person questioned up in terms that have nothing at all to do with the essence of what the speaker is trying to express. A message of resurrection and new life is being hijacked by the literalist. But what does Christ reply? He actually sets himself free from the terms of his questioner. He calls those who receive eternal life "children of God, children of the resurrection." He proclaims a God not of the dead but of the living.

Today is Remembrance Sunday. Today in our Eucharist we will celebrate Christ's memory. Not a dead memory of the past but a making present, a remembering of all that is life giving. We will re-member a life torn apart by violence, hatred, human jealousy, prejudice, religious fanaticism, political expediency, the manipulation of power. But we will also remember that that this broken body is also the body which gives us life. It feeds our present. We are that

body, bearing its wounds and its brokenness, called to re-member each member of it and bring unity and healing. This is a memory worth living for. A God not of the dead but of the living. This is what our worship and sacrament celebrates in sign and symbol, word, music – a memory deeper and more vital than all other memories, a memory reaching across and through time, cultures communities and individuals: the memory of a God who is the resurrection and the life we long for.

Today is the day on which we remember the terrible cost of war and the stories of those who have paid the price of war. We remember because our own stories and future are inextricably linked with theirs. These are not dead stories, they are the lives of those who have given us our own stories, nationhood, values and identity, and shown us a way to life. We will remember them.

Archbishop Romero said that the glory of God was humanity fully alive. When we remember we realise too that we are not alone. We stand among those who have fought, struggled and died in the defence of humanity, among those who have stood against oppression, and longed for peace in ways however small. We are not celebrating the violence, we are giving thanks for fullness of life, a life worth fighting for and even dying for. We realise that we are linked, we belong to the same story. The story has a name. It is the story of a man two thousand years ago who struggled, died and rose again for those same truths. And lives on.

We will re-member him.