

REMEMBRANCE

Reflection delivered in Carlops Church, Sunday 11 November 2018 by Rev Stewart McPherson

This is without doubt a significant Remembrance Sunday as we recognise 100 years of remembering ...

100 years of prayers, of reflection, of penitence
100 years to show that we have learned that their deaths were not in vain

Yet, over those 100 years conflicts have taken place somewhere in the world ever since in which British forces have been involved ...

In the 1920s there was the Anglo-Irish conflict ...
In the 30s Palestine, Aden ...
In the 40s World War II ...
In the 50s: Korea, Suez ...
In the 60s: Borneo, Oman ...
In the 70s: Northern Ireland ...
In the 80s The Falklands ...
In the 90s: The Gulf, Bosnia ...
And into a new millennium – Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya ...

100 years of remembering – and what have we learned?

Today, church bells will peal across the UK to reflect the sense of thanksgiving that was felt as the end of the First World War was announced. So we recall that; and as we do, we recognise that although we remember the sense of celebration that the “war to end all wars” had ended, we know it is not a celebration of the end of conflict ... for that has *not* ended.

So what are we doing when we remember?

There is no one here today who remembers the First World War; of course not. But there are people whose parents were alive then, and they heard stories. And some were involved in the second war and other conflicts.

I remember stories my grandfather shared from his time in Gallipoli and France in World War I; I remember my father’s stories of World War II – of life as a Japanese POW; I remember my brother’s stories of serving in The Gulf, Bosnia and Northern Ireland.

But many have heard such stories, as have you. Moving as these stories are, touching and sad as they are, I and many of us were not there.

So what shape does our remembering take?

It cannot just be personal nostalgia, for we are too far away from the event, and anyway, personal remembering is not always accurate:

How many remember when all Christmases were white? When summer holidays were sunny every day? When churches were full every week?

As with Maurice Chevalier, we recall ...

We dined at 9 We dined at 8
I was on time You were late.
Ah yes, I remember it well.

Personal nostalgia is not always accurate remembering, and it is sometimes only when the memories of individuals are drawn together in collective memory that we come closer to honest and accurate remembering.

For individual remembering can be very selective.

There are things in our own lives we may purposely remember to forget. Events, actions, relationships which we wish never happened and somehow manage to erase from our minds or lock away in a dark corner. We prefer to remember only the things which offer a more pleasant reading of our life-story. Or, we remember more strongly the things which nurse our wrath, keep the wound weeping, make permanent the pointing finger of blame.

But collective memory can also be selective.

For example, the history we learn at school, which portrays events as one-sided and biased, be it film versions of the life of Robert the Bruce or William Wallace, or our own country's history, where we manage to ignore the way we treated crofters in the clearances and the church's sanctioning of that. Or, as in Germany, where for a time, history was written and taught in classrooms as though the Holocaust never occurred.

Remembering is important and has been throughout time. We can see it in the story of the People of God.

The Bible is laced with themes of remembering to give people strength to continue the journey of faith. Remembering your roots, your ancestors, your God. Just as God remembers his people and forgets their sins. The Passover meal is the symbolic remembering of that journey and relationship, as it recalls not just the highs, but also the pains and the struggles. And we know this was central to Jesus' own life and ministry, symbolically enacted at the Last Supper as he broke bread and shared wine saying "Do this to remember me".

But does this help answer how we remember?

We are inclined to believe that the opposite to remembering is forgetting, but perhaps we need to take time to consider the alternative to *re-membering* as *dis-membering*. When we *re-member*, we put something together again with the possibility of re-living or re-presenting the experience. When we *dis-member*, we fragment something; we break up the past.

And as we gather to remember 100 years since the end of the Great War, we cannot help but notice that in society today we often live in a way that dis-members rather than re-members. A society fragmented between those who are wealthy and those who are poor;

those who are able and those who are disabled; the fragmentation between those born into opportunity and those not; those provided with good education and those not; those of different faith traditions; ethnicity, colour.

For example, this past year has seen a rise in hate crimes against people with disabilities. There has been a notable increase in racist crimes since the Brexit referendum, There has been increased aggression in the vocabulary we hear from America's leadership. Some of the political and international language of dis-membering is not too dissimilar to the attitudes and language that preceded the First World War.

As we look around 100 years on, are we re-membering? Or dis-membering?

The Christian response to this fragmentation and dis-membering is one of honest and accurate collective re-membering. Re-membering through the drawing together of broken people and fragmented families and disjointed cultures, in order to re-member the body of Christ ... to bring him to life in our generation.

But we often choose to be selective with our remembering: too self-centred, too personal. Perhaps even too afraid?

We remember, not only to mourn, but to discover or rediscover hope, strength and a way forward.

I am reminded of a trip to France a few years ago with my son and daughter during which we visited the Normandy beaches. Among other things, there are the remnants of the German gun posts and the Mulberry harbours in the sea. We were looking at them when children were playing and laughing and swimming in the water. I commented that it seemed a little insensitive where so many had died. Whereupon my son said: "But Dad, they died so that we could swim and play and laugh!" "Well remembered!" I said.

100 years have passed since that peace of 11.11. And *we* cannot remember because we were not there. But we re-member and continue to re-member, by being part of a piecing together, a reshaping of our lives, our communities, our world, in order to create a new picture of our future hopes for us and our children and their children.

- Through proper re-membering, we are put in touch with our past with all its brokenness and all its shame.
- Through re-membering, we bring to mind the forgotten potentials and dreams in our past on which we can still draw on today.
- Through re-membering, we can discover that no present struggle or question is disconnected from what has gone before.

The Christian way does offer an antidote to the dis-membering of our world today, through true re-membering of the past. And a belief – hard as it is at times to hold to it – a firm belief that the God who was with us through past tragedy will be with us through any present difficulty. Through re-membering, we can take the broken or wrongly assembled jigsaw of our lives, of our nation and of our world, and begin to reassemble it in a new way, into a more peaceful and just pattern. And in doing so, then we will truly remember.

Amen