



“... For your tomorrow, we gave our today.”

A sermon by Revd Will Morris

Readings: Jonah 3.1-5, 10; Hebrews 9.24-end; Mark 1.14-20

The Naga Hills in Northeast India rise and fall in a series of steep, forested ridges from the valley of the Brahmaputra in Assam, eastwards to the Burmese border. Seventy years ago in this hill country there were no railways – so common in other parts of India – with the result that the railhead at Dimapur and the city of Imphal more than one hundred miles to the south, were connected by a single road. On one of the ridges along which that road ran lay the town of Kohima. In the spring of 1944, General Renya Mataguchi, the commander of the Japanese Fifteenth Army, launched an offensive from Burma to capture Imphal. But to capture Imphal he needed first to cut the supply road from Dimapur, and to cut that supply road, in turn, he needed to capture Kohima. In two months of constant, brutal hand-to-hand fighting, British and Indian forces held the Japanese at bay, the ground taken and lost being measured only in yards, and sometimes only in feet, most memorably over the length and breadth of the Deputy Commissioner’s tennis court. By the end of May 1944, 4,000 had died on the British and Indian side, and over 5,000 on the Japanese. Many of the former were buried in the cemetery that now stretches down a spur of the ridge from the site of the tennis court, to the place where the Deputy Commissioner’s bungalow had stood. And at that lower end of the cemetery, on the memorial to the British Second Division, is a plaque that carries these words:

*When you go home, tell them of us and say,
For your tomorrow, we gave our today.*

Three months ago, on the 70th anniversary of VJ Day, those two simple lines, ten syllables each, were read from the lectern over there by the son of General Mataguchi’s opposite number, General Bill Slim. And listening to him read those words that day were a number of very old men, veterans of that Far East conflict.

But there is now almost no one under the age of ninety who can have fought in the Second World War. And so we stand on the cusp of living memory, as that war moves from the present to the past; from lived experience into history. And that raises the question today, on Remembrance Sunday, about what it means to remember. About how, and why, we remember a war that very few now living themselves experienced; about how, and why, we remember the dead that very few now living ever knew?

Why does all that matter, you might ask? We wear a poppy that connects us to Flanders Fields. We listen to a bugle play the same Last Post those soldiers heard. And we pause, sadly, on the astronomical, inconceivable number of the Twentieth Century war dead. Isn’t that remembrance enough? Well, perhaps not. As Christians, while we should certainly remember those who fought and died, we have an obligation to do more than remember only for the sake of the past. We need also to remember for the sake of future. Today is not Victory Sunday, or in this country even Veterans’ Sunday. It is Remembrance Sunday. It’s not simply a commemoration of a past event; or a simply a commemoration of those who fought – though we certainly do both. But it’s also a day when we remember, not just in order that we might not forget, but in order that we might look forward. So to return to those words I just quoted, I’d like to explore why what has become known

as the Kohima Epitaph may be the best way to do that. Why these two lines don't just look back, but also forwards. Why they hold in appropriate balance the past, the present and the future.

The words were first written, in a slightly different form, in 1917, towards the end of the First World War. That war, so new and so shocking with its mechanised butchery, and its industrial scale killing, in fact brought forth few good epitaphs. The official ones were often bland to the point of banality. Even Rudyard Kipling could only manage "the glorious dead" for the inscription on the Cenotaph – a palpably inadequate response to the hundreds of thousands, even millions, slaughtered in the four-year nightmare of the trenches. And yet at the other end of the spectrum, the anger, anguish and despair of the war poets, while it makes for searing, heart-rending poetry, nevertheless by its very vividness keeps the pain so raw, keeps us so firmly in that present moment, that moving beyond it, looking forward, becomes impossible. So neither works, because we need both to remember vividly and realistically; but also to remember in a way that places that memory in context: a lesson from the past, applicable to the present, and pointing to the future.

To ground this for a moment, think of the central Christian experience, the death of Jesus on the cross. In remembering it, we should not hide the horror of that brutal death, or seek to sanitise it, or minimise it in bland phrases. That would be to strip it of its meaning. That would be to reduce the cross to an abstract geometric design, devoid of emotional resonance. But at the same time in remembering that brutal death we should not be transfixed by its horror and suffering, its blood and its agony. That, in turn, would transform the cross into a gruesome, mesmerising, never-ending moment of judicial murder – a gory crucifix, not a cross – from which we cannot tear our eyes. So, while the cross cannot be abstract, nor can we afford to remain forever suspended simply in that moment of Jesus's most excruciating pain. Because what we are called upon to do is to recognise in his act of today, his message for tomorrow. The message that from that violent death flows all the hope we've ever had in the forgiveness of our sins, in our reconciliation with God, and in the healing of our violent, broken world. As Christians, we must balance, past, present and future.

So, to return to my earlier question: how do we properly remember what was done at Kohima – and why – as we move from that moment of living memory? How do we remember, and why, what is now slipping into the past in a way that still links it to the present and future? And, as I already said, I think the answer may lie in those two short lines of the Kohima Epitaph.

Let's look at it in two parts. "*When you go home, tell them of us and say ...*". The key, evocative, word here is "home". But it's not evocative in a sentimental way, but matter-of-factly. Not used as an appeal to patriotism, nor used to deflect from the reality of painful, violent death. What it does, is simply remind us of those who had left their home to fight for that home, and who died a long way from it. But there is no triumphalism about that sacrifice, only a simple request to take back to that home the story of what they had done, and to tell it to others. A simple request to not be forgotten. "*When you go home, tell them of us, and say ...*"

But while that first line is elegant and understated, it's the second half of the epitaph that makes this a model for Christian remembrance: "*... for your tomorrow, we gave our today.*" To take the second half of that first, here is the reminder of sacrifice. It could hardly be clearer. We have died for you. We have paid the ultimate price. For you we have given everything. And that is something worth remembering; which deserves to be remembered. But that could also become a statement that engenders guilt leading us to dwell in that past; or a statement that incites revenge; or, even worse, a statement that glorifies the violence of that sacrifice. But it doesn't, because of the first half of that line: *for your tomorrow*. This makes clear that the sacrifice of today is made to secure a tomorrow that is different and better than today. It's not about fighting because we've always fought; or about inducting another generation into the cycle of violence. It's about a sacrifice made to secure a tomorrow where people at home can live in peace, because, today, people far from home have died in violence. It's in the spirit of the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross two thousand years ago, when for our tomorrow, he gave his today.

So, as the old soldiers who fought on the ridge at Kohima and elsewhere move into history, the epitaph in its simplicity, in its modesty, in its honesty, and in its hopefulness, can show us as Christians how to remember a past we did not experience. How to remember that past in a way that honours the dead of yesterday and the living of tomorrow. How to remember that past in a way that looks back in gratitude and forward in hope.

*When you go home, tell them of us and say,
For your tomorrow, we gave our today.*

But there is one last thing. Because there is more to Christian remembrance than only remembering the sacrifice of others; more than simple gratitude for what they gave. There is also a “why” to Christian remembrance, not just a “how”. A “why” that links the past and future, here in the present. In honouring that past with gratitude, and looking to that future with hope, we are given, ourselves, an opportunity right now and here. A chance; a gift; an invitation.

And so what is it in another seventy years’ time that someone might say you gave today? What is it in seventy years’ time that someone might say you did in your present, for their future? What is it in seventy years’ time that someone might remember as the sacrifice, inspired by yesterday, that you made today, for their tomorrow?

What, today, can you give? What, for tomorrow, will you sacrifice?

Amen.