



Remembrance Sunday
Sunday 13 November 2011

Remembrance Sunday

A sermon by the Right Revd Peter Hullah

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11; Matthew 25.14-30

About 20 years ago a curate described St Martin's as an island in a turbulent sea. "The congregations arrive, tie up their dingies briefly then paddle off never to be seen again, all except for the regulars."

This may not be an exact representation of our congregation today; however whether you have travelled as a visitor, by land, air or water or are one of our many regulars, we are delighted to welcome you this morning. Today, in turbulent times, there is likely to be a common magnet which draws us to church for it's Remembrance Sunday, the closest Sunday to Armistice Day and the time appointed for reflection and silence as we contemplate deep things.

St Martin's towers above Whitehall which will be the focus for the world in under an hour and as poppy wearers we identify very personally with remembering and remembrance.

Before we think globally, let us start locally. Here in the north aisle of the church we have our own remembrance memorial. St Martin's has had a long connection with Far East Prisoners of War and an inscription reads "To the many of those who died as prisoners of war or as civilian internees whilst in Japanese hands 1941 – 1945 and of those who died subsequently as a result of their sufferings during captivity." And as though to underline that sense of bleak suffering in the display case below there are 2 blocks of teak, part of railway sleepers and part of a railway line, taken from the Burma Siam railway which was built with prisoner of war labour.

It happened yes – should it have happened through such cruelty? No – but we bear witness to the memories of those who built and those who suffered. On that memorial there are names and crosses like this one which say simply In Remembrance. Many years on we have freedoms internationally which allow these objects to be seen by visitors to this church from every country in the world. And maybe those simple blocks of wood with their stories animate our thankful remembering and act as signposts for the future as to how we would wish the world to be. That will be our remembering.

From thinking of our own small poignant memorial we let our minds wander to what is taking place outside. This morning thousands will parade down Whitehall past Sir Edward Lutyens' Cenotaph – itself an empty tomb which has been honoured by royalty and by political leaders. The parade and act of honouring is a remembering of actions, a story telling without words of the costs and the consequences of war. Later in this service we will participate in our national two minutes silence, a silence which opens doors to some of the most painful places we can imagine. The silence will be shared by those who have seen and experienced indescribable suffering and the most cruel loss. It will be a silence well understood by serving soldiers, airmen and sailors. It will be felt deep in the heart of leaders who take decisions which affect the lives of others and it will be a silence which is felt beneath the skin of every journalist, correspondent and photographer who has been near the heart of darkness. We are the local parish for key decision makers and Remembrance Sunday is a time when we pray for them that we may have integrity in our public life. We must act as though the well being of others depends directly on what we do – it often does in ways we may never realise and we must never forget.

Each of us will have a remembrance image close at hand. During the last week, poppy wearing teenagers in a large school in Accrington paused to pray. Muslims and Christians, boys and girls talked of remembering our shared past. There were poems reminding us how war can unleash evil and prayers that God's love would be the light which would burn off the mist of hostility. I became aware that those young people know something of the painful consequences of not living peacefully with people who are different and their words came from first hand experience of conflicts.

In a Wiltshire village today, I know that families will gather round a small local war memorial with the damp fallen leaves illustrating sadness without words. Many of the surnames on the plaque are the same as the surnames of the worshippers. For that community, Remembrance is about family – it is intimate and personal. Prayers will show how highly human life is valued and when that community says they will not forget their ancestors, you can feel the pain and integrity of their words.

And Remembrance is global. I have had the privilege of attending Remembrance Sunday worship in the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery in Khartoum where the grave names tell stories of wide cultural and national backgrounds. Political and diplomatic and religious leaders meet there today in the dusty heat to go deeper together. And yes, I feel it will make a difference because for a moment in a world where often life seems cheap and ideologies can be pursued regardless of human cost, we are pausing to say no – every life is a name, created in the image of God, unique and to be treasured. This land and all lands have been made sacred and we ignore that at our peril. Anything less than full respect for human dignity is open to hubris. We must have a very clear view of our way ahead in the long term if we cross the line forcefully to impose our own way.

But let us return to Church. Only a few feet away from our remembrance memorial is a statue which celebrates the extraordinary action of one Roman soldier. Martin our patron saint, is remembered here as a fourth century Roman army officer who on seeing a beggar got down from his horse, drew his sword and cut his cloak in two. In a dream Jesus came to Martin, wearing a half cloak – and the words from Matthew's gospel rang out. Whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did to me.

As we read in Matthew's gospel Chapter 25, God's judgement is frighteningly clear cut. Use your talents to the full. Ignore those who need help at your peril. So Martin having left the army exercised fully and openly his distinctive Christian talent of healing. He became a focal point for communities where healing flourished and the bed rock of those early communities is that every human being deserves dignity and deserves to be treated with love. Our patronal festival (which occurs this weekend) is the time when we share our stories of how this community continues to grow through its commitment to the most vulnerable and most marginal. I invite you to come and hear more this evening at a very special turning of the page as new altar is blessed and dedicated through sharing the stories of our community.

Our community vocation here is one of remembering all, valuing all and caring for all. During the last week, we have worshipped with wealthy bankers giving thanks for the potential of philanthropy for changing society. From another perspective, we have celebrated with The Connection and with Housing Justice holding an act of remembrance for the homeless who died during the year.

There has been music in church played by world famous musicians and songs sung by the Choir with no Name, each creative and inspirational in different ways.

We invite questions under God and we promise to face the sharp issues openly as there are no imposed answers. However, we do know that God does not leave us in the suffering, but offers a spiritual well spring from which flows life which heals the past, eases the present and has the

potential to make all things new. For followers of Jesus, remembering is as much about the future as it is the past.

The late Michael Mayne in his book *Pray Love Remember* reminds us that Remember is not only the opposite of to forget. It is the opposite of to dismember. To dismember a body is to take it apart limb by limb. To re-member someone is to do what all the king's horses and all the king's men could not do to Humpty Dumpty – put him together again. It is what only God can do, to re-member me, to make me new, reshape me in God's likeness.

And there is our tableau for Remembrance Sunday morning – for between the war memorial and the statue of St Martin, is the place where we receive bread and wine. In this Eucharist, we will have seen that ordinary things will have been blessed to become extraordinary food for our renewal and for our reshaping. We will have heard that this action of making communion is done in remembrance of Jesus who lived and died and who lives on in each of us. God's communion becomes our communion. Life in common becomes our vision for a community which every day is renewed through service and through prayer, with the Spirit of God animating our journey together.

Therefore our Remembrance worship focuses on three interwoven themes. Before God:-
We pledge to honour those who have risked their lives on our behalf to uphold the values we regard as sacred. We will not forget.
We promise to live attentively to the Gospel of love which recognises the worth and dignity of each person.
We pray that we may allow ourselves to be reshaped into the community which God would wish us to become. We are confident in God's power to re-member us.

It was experiencing the shattering impact of the Second World War which caused Leonard Cheshire and Sue Ryder to dedicate their lives to the service of others and I end with a prayer written by them.

Give to us, Lord, the grace to spend ourselves for those who are still alive, that we may prove most truly that we have not forgotten those who died.

This we ask in Jesus name,
Amen.