Sunday 12 November: Third Sunday before Advent: Remembrance Sunday

“I must go back and be with them”

Readings: Hebrews 9:24-end; Mark 1:14-20

“The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near”

21st October is commemorated in this country as Trafalgar Day. Here in this Square named after Nelson’s last naval victory, that usually means a parade of sea cadets, but on special days - like the 200th anniversary last year - sometimes means bigger public celebrations. The parades celebrate part of our collective remembering, our history as a people, but 200 years on from the day itself the memories of the day are no longer personal ones. There’s no-one who was present on that day, or even a child of someone present to tell us what it was really like for the sailors involved. Instead our memories of it have become institutionalised – and from where we stand now, we might even say those memories have become sanitised. While Trafalgar Day commemorates a famous military victory, it’s hard to find in the public celebrations much of reflection or insight into the real human cost of that day.

In the South Wales Valleys, where I grew up, 21st October is remembered for rather different reasons. It was on that day in 1966 at about 9.15am that the Pantglas colliery tip tumbled down a hillside bringing with it mud and slurry. The landslide demolished a farmhouse, a street of terraced houses and Pantglas Primary School where children had just arrived for the last day before half term. 116 children and 28 adults lost their lives that day and the village of Aberfan became a household name.

This year marked the 40th anniversary of that disaster, and so the day received rather more news coverage than usual. I was four years old at the time of the Aberfan disaster – in my first term in school – and the same age as many of the children who died. So I can’t honestly say I remember any of the details of the day. I can’t even remember whether we had a television at the time. My detailed memory of the day is almost non-existent, yet listening to that news coverage of the 40th anniversary of Aberfan just a few weeks ago, I found all sorts of emotional memories which I didn’t know I had come flooding to the surface. Memories of anxious mothers at the gates of my primary school; memories of having my hand held just that bit tighter on the way home from school; memories of parents and grandparents speaking the word Aberfan in hushed tones for years after. Aberfan is recent enough to be a personal memory – a hazy yet powerfully emotional memory for me – a distinct detailed memory for families, rescuers and some of the survivors. The memories of that day live on in the stories people tell, in the deeply buried feelings that sometimes rise to the surface. Such memories are not just about the past – they touch us in the here and now, sometimes in raw human emotion, sometimes illuminating a different yet related human experience.

And perhaps that is a key distinction between the institutionalised remembering of public parades, and the personal memories of experience. For memories which touch us at a personal level are as much part of the present as they of the past. Such memories come at a cost because they ask us to bring the pain of past into our daily living such that the present might be transformed.

“The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near”.
We could say that Christianity is a faith built on remembrance. Week by week, in this central act of Christian worship, we hear those words of Jesus “Do this in remembrance of me”. And when Jesus spoke those words at the Last Supper, he was of course part of another act of remembering – as the people of Israel in celebrating the Passover recalled their own deliverance from slavery. We read the Gospels, as we have this morning, hearing the account of the calling Simon Peter and Andrew, of James and John and see in them the memories of those personal encounters between Jesus and his disciples.

Christianity is a faith built on remembrance, built on stories and events of long ago. But how does that remembrance touch us in the here and now? How do we stop such memories becoming institutionalised and sanitised and experience them as part of our present? How do we begin to bear the cost of such memories such that we can with honesty say here today at this time in this place “The Kingdom of God has come near”?

This weekend, in ceremonies and events throughout the land, those who lost their lives in conflict are remembered, as the anniversary of the day that marked the end of the First World War is recalled. As personal memories of that conflict fade with the passing of those who were part of it, for many, it is the voices of the poets of that war that speak across the year. For many, it is the poetic imagination that stops memories becoming institutionalised and tell of the costliness of remembering.

One of those poets, Wilfred Owen, wrote ironically of the easy happiness when imagination fails, and the costliness of personal encounter and personal remembering is abandoned.

“Happy are those who lose imagination:
Their senses in some scorching cautery of battle
Now long since ironed,
Can laugh among the dying, unconcerned.”

But at the end of that poem, Owen speaks of the true cost of those blunted senses:

“By choice they have made themselves immune
To pity and whatever mourns in man….
Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;
Whatever shares
The eternal reciprocity of tears.”

Most of us are not blessed with the poetic imagination of a Wilfred Owen. We may not, by choice, have made our senses and our imagination immune to the tears or pain of remembering, but we still struggle to make the connection between the past and the present; between the reality of a Kingdom made visible in the life of the man Jesus 2000 years ago and the Kingdom that comes near to us now, as we step outside the doors into 21st century. We still struggle to make the connection between the Jesus made real in our remembrance at the altar week by week and the Jesus who says to us in this Kingdom season in 2006 “the time is fulfilled”. It’s all too easy to let our faith and worship and prayer become disconnected from daily experience, to become an institutionalised, sanitised form of remembrance – a remembrance of our defining. Yet connecting our experiences, making the imaginative leap of faith, making our remembrance as much part of our present as our past is what we are called to do in our individual and collective lives of discipleship.

In a letter to his mother at the end of 1917, Wilfred Owen tried to explain why he felt, as a poet, compelled to return to the trenches after a spell in hospital. Movingly, he talks about the
look on the faces of the soldiers in the camp and says of it “It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them.”

In this Kingdom season, we are called through prayerful reflection, through imaginative encounter to hear the Gospel call to follow and to live the reality of that call.

“And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them.” wrote Owen.

For us to make the Kingdom more than a distant memory, or an unreachable future, we must with Christ in our remembering of him such that that we make him present among us in the here and now. When we do this “in remembrance of him”, we are called to bring the costliness of Christ’s death and resurrection into our daily living such that the present might be transformed; such that in both the memorable and the mundane we might recognise:

“The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near”