

## Reflections and Prayers: In Remembrance

This is the 32<sup>nd</sup> in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

### Memories and Remembrance

For many people, Remembrance Sunday and/or Armistice Day (they coincide every six years) are the hardest of all commemorations, for they evoke the saddest memories – of loved ones lost or killed in war. Barely anyone can now recall World War 1 and you have to be nearly 80 to remember World War 2, but then came the Korean War, the Falklands, Iraq, Afghanistan and the ‘troubles’ in Ireland. There are War Memorials in most towns and villages, as well as in churches, often bearing well-known local family names. The National Memorial Arboretum reminds visitors of the horrors of past conflicts, with the recurring words on the memorials of ‘lives laid down in the cause of freedom’. But they are not just in Britain; go to Belgium, the Menin Gate in Ypres, or the Tyne Cot cemetery nearby or to the beaches at Gallipoli: see the tens of thousands of gravestones, crosses and names. Then there are the harrowing images of Auschwitz in Poland, Dresden in Germany and Hiroshima in Japan. The justice and purpose of war may be long debated, but we remember that, in addition to the sacrifice of members of armed forces in countless countries, innocent civilians – children, women and men – died on all sides.



How has war touched you, your life or your family at some point in time, perhaps now distant, but still vivid in memory? As I reflect on and narrate a few of my own experiences, I invite you to remember yours. Like mine, they may be an eclectic mix, some intimate, some painful, some moving, but each unique.



Having just turned three years of age at the end of WW2, I have direct memories only of its aftermath: the red buses of the United Bus Company in Northumberland still in camouflage green and brown hue, the increasingly derelict air-raid shelters becoming children’s play haunts, food and clothes rationing – with the little named books and cut-out coupons.

But the family had experienced the tragedy of loss, known by so many. In 1943, one of my mother’s only two cousins, Humphrey Ellison, was badly wounded serving with the Army in the Mediterranean region, put on a hospital ship bound for home which was torpedoed and sunk, and he drowned. I was never told what happened after that: it was too painful a memory for my mother and her aunt Amie (Humphrey’s mother) who – it was said in the family – never got over her loss. His photo remained proudly on Aunt Amie’s mantelpiece for the rest of her life – I remember it well when we visited her in Pegswood – and my mother kept her copy which I now have and share with you.

In April 1982, at the height of the Falklands War, I attended a Philips international management meeting in Eindhoven, Holland. My opposite numbers were there from across the world, including Mr Nadin from Argentina. We approached each other tentatively, shook hands, embraced, and agreed to have lunch together, aside from our colleagues. As we broke bread, it was nothing less than a Holy Communion of friends who bore no animosity towards each other. Despite representing opposing nations, we both regretted what was happening in the South Atlantic, not least the loss of life of armed forces of both countries and civilian Falkland Islanders.

As a local preacher, I have been privileged to lead Remembrance Sunday services many times, in many places, sometimes partly outdoor as a community Remembrance. In 1994, in the Kent village of Headcorn, I shared with the local Anglican and Roman Catholic priests in a short act of worship on the main A274 Maidstone to

Tenterden road which bisects the village: just before 11 am, traffic was stopped in both directions, people emerged from stationary vehicles, the church congregations and community gathered and the village fell silent.



Most poignant, it was, to the day, exactly 50 years ago on Sunday November 8<sup>th</sup> 1970, when I led the Remembrance Sunday morning service at Higher Walton Methodist Church near Preston: we attended Fulwood in the then Preston Trinity Methodist Circuit from 1969 to 1972. In the vestry before the service, the church steward intimated to me that a particular elderly lady (he pointed out where she would be sitting) would be upset when we came to the solemn Act of Remembrance, adding thoughtfully that it was nothing I'd said but that the moment meant so much to her each year. 'You see', he continued, 'her husband was killed in the First World War in

1915 and she has been a widow ever since'. Even writing this now brings it all back: I can picture her, quietly, unobtrusively, crying and remembering, alone: 55 years and counting, without the husband she loved.

This is the day of Remembrance. We will not and must never forget. Thanks be to God.

*John Bell, November 2020. Photos of (1) Tyne Cot cemetery near Ypres, (2) Humphrey Ellison and (3) the War Memorial in the grounds of All Saints Parish Church, Higher Walton: the lady's husband's name is surely inscribed on it.*

## Remembering

In November we enter a time of remembering. It began with us remembering All Saints on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> November, and All Souls on 2<sup>nd</sup> November. That will take us to remembering the Gunpowder Plot on 5<sup>th</sup> November, followed by Remembrance Sunday on 8<sup>th</sup> November and Armistice Day on 11<sup>th</sup> November.

The suspected terrorist was said to have been caught in the act of setting the bomb. He was thrown into a cell where he could not stand, sit or lie down. He was tortured. Then he was executed in ways as horrible as the worst atrocities you could imagine. Crowds of people watched and cheered.

Do you remember, remember? The celebrations of it still go on. You may have taken part in them. He was Guy Fawkes. The target was the Houses of Parliament. The cell was called the Little Ease. The execution was barbaric.

Guy Fawkes was a Roman Catholic caught up in vicious, bloody conflicts between Catholic and Protestant versions of the Christian faith in this country. Both sides did this sort of thing to people from the other side.

Sadly, such conflicts between people of the same faith, people of different faiths, and people of no faith have gone on ever since. You do not have to look very far in the news to find examples now. Surely it is time that in remembering, we learnt together that killing other people in the name of faith (or lack of faith) is wrong?

In 2014 I was representing the Methodist Church at the ceremony at the Cenotaph in London. The Cenotaph is an empty tomb. But my sense was that it had not been left empty because there had been a resurrection. It was an empty tomb because that is what war does. It leaves communities empty of soldiers, civilians, loved ones, family and friends who have been killed. It creates a hollowness that passes down to succeeding generations: a futility or a vanity, as the book of Ecclesiastes puts it. Emptiness, emptiness responds the preacher; everything is emptiness.

Death, remembering, violence and grieving. Where is God in all these things? We can either run away from these questions or look them in the eye. Sometimes when we think and even try to pray about these things we might feel that God has abandoned us. Yet as I stood between the Buddhist and the Muslim representatives and heard the former saying the Lord's Prayer with me, I found myself thinking of Jesus being killed barbarically and thinking himself forsaken by God. But God was with him in the awfulness and the emptiness, and God is with us too.

Remember, remember! How we remember and why is important. Remembering is a proper part of celebration. So what are you doing to celebrate 2020? "What is special about 2020?", I hear you say. For some of you the answer to that might be easy. There may be any number of personal, family, church or community milestones during the year, some of which might be highly significant to you, and possibly to others.

Yet what if some of the milestones or anniversaries have unhappy memories attached to them: bereavements, redundancies, or other crises? For all of us, 2020 is also the year of Coronavirus. Can we be expected to celebrate things when there is pain or grief in them? Celebration though is not just a matter of joy (but nor does it exclude joy). In a profound sense it means coming together to honour, respect, acknowledge and bear witness to something; and to treat that something as a whole, good and bad, joys and sorrows.

That is why it is appropriate to laugh at a funeral as well as cry; and to shed tears at a wedding as well as rejoice. Every change or development we experience (particularly in relationships) involves losses and gains. In life there is something of death, and in death something of life. The Christian gospel, with the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus at its core, bears witness to that. We are experiencing the truth of it whenever we come together to celebrate what we call the Lord's Supper, where we remember both Jesus's Last Supper with his friends before he was executed, and his meals with them after his resurrection.

It is right, therefore, to celebrate things as a whole. To do that, we have to remember them as a whole. That includes the bits that we do not like, or would choose not to remember, because they do not fit our prejudices, preconceptions or present purposes.

If we are honest about doing that, we might find ourselves starting to long to feel that God is with us. That leads us at the end of November to Advent. In Advent we pour out our longing and learn to wait for God to come and be with us now and forever. The Hebrew term (found for example in Isaiah chapters 7 and 8) for God being with us is 'Immanuel' (sometimes written in English as 'Emmanuel'). In the human birth and life of Jesus, God did come to be with human beings. Moreover, raised from the dead, he keeps on coming to us in the power of the Spirit. God comes to be with us in Christ, so that we might be with him in Christ. Suddenly all of the Christmas stories become hugely significant for us.

Remember? Yes, remember!

*Revd Ken Howcroft, November 2020. Now retired, Ken is a former President of the Methodist Conference, and was the minister of the Methodist Church in Rome before the Revd Tim Macquiban, who wrote in last week's Reflection. The President of the Conference always represents the Methodist Church at the Cenotaph.*

## **Both Sides – a Meditation for Remembrance Sunday**

We remember and recall many people and events this day.

We confess that our remembering is selective and prudent.

We well remember what gave us delight;  
We readily remember the things we agreed with;  
We eagerly remember all that fitted our point of view.

Help us to remember that there was another side too.

That our delight was often at great cost to others;  
That the things we agreed with sometimes brought misery to others;  
That our point of view might have been biased and even wrong.

We remember those who were away, fighting, and those on the home front.

Those who died in some foreign field, freezing ocean or prison camp;  
Those who coped with death in their blitzed streets in London, Glasgow and Manchester;  
Those who were bereaved, and whose children were orphaned.

Help us to remember that there were people from another side too.

Those from nations we then knew as enemies who died in the same fields and oceans and were held captive in other prisons;  
Those who coped with death in their blitzed streets in Berlin, Cologne and Dresden;  
Those ordinary people, just like us, who lost their loved ones.

Today, Lord, we remember people from both sides.

People whose grief continued down the years;  
People whose pain lasted a lifetime;  
People who did not want war;  
People who longed for peace;  
People from both sides.

Above all, we remember that you are God, and all people are your people.  
People of all faiths and none; of all nations and races; of all colours and ages.

And we remember that nothing can separate us, whoever we were then and are now, from your constant and unmerited love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

*John Bell, November 2008. For the Remembrance Sunday service at Norley Methodist Church.*

## Words of Remembrance

'They shall grow not old as we that are left  
grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years  
condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the  
morning  
We will remember them.'

### And a final prayer:

Almighty and eternal God, from whose love  
in Christ we cannot be parted, either by  
death or life: hear our prayers and  
thanksgivings for all whom we remember  
this day; fulfil in them the purpose of your  
love; and bring us, with them, to the fullness  
of your eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.



*Words of prayer from 'A Service from Remembrance Sunday' published by the SPCK in 1968. My copy, inherited from my father, is stamped 'British Legion: not to be taken away'. Photo by Joan Bell, July 2020, of wild poppies in a field along the lane by Dutton Park Farm, Cheshire.*

### Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at [belljohna@btinternet.com](mailto:belljohna@btinternet.com) Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Hymns are referenced as far as possible from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymnbook (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P or even the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book – MHB), and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC's present hymnal.