

Remembrance 2018

Psalm 7

John 20:24-29

(Psalm 7 happened to be set for morning prayer the day after British Parliament agreed to bomb Syria.)

Through every medium, this 100th anniversary year, we have seen and heard countless enormously moving memories of the First World War. It leaves us wondering how on earth such terrifying memories were borne all those years. While this very week a Birmingham colleague has taken the funeral of a soldier after suicide and the question of psychological support after conflict is rightly in the news, how much more remarkable it is that without any such support those people carried First World War horrors for so long in heart and mind.

Thomas is offended by his friends' naivety. Their words "We have seen the Lord" enrage him because they seem to be remembering very badly. He fears they are reaching back for some comfortable memory of Jesus. Their nostalgia is empty, sickening, disrespectful, avoiding the horror of what happened. So he teaches them how to remember properly. With sickening graphic detail he forces them to remember the deadly wounds, the penetration, the degradation: "unless I put my hand in those wounds..." what? "I will not trust."

Thomas thinks he is the only realistic one who remembers properly, but he is in fact holding himself in a place of mistrust; he is remembering bitterly, deliberately stoking his anger, nursing and provoking his own rage. "I choose not to be trusting. I choose to nurse suspicion. I choose hate." In other words, if the other disciples do not seem to be remembering well, Thomas is remembering badly in a different way.

Jesus appears. He greets them all with words of peace. He shows Thomas a new realism. Here indeed are my wounds. Graphically, sickeningly, yet somehow now strangely softly, he invites Thomas to put his hand in the wounds. There is no denial of them. There is no naivety. The wounds are remembered in all their detail, yet he brings peace. With Jesus truthful memory wakes us from naivety at the same time as melting bitterness and mistrust.

Just a few days before, Jesus had given the disciples the image of bread and wine as body and blood to remember him by. It must have puzzled them. Now, as they hear the exchange with Thomas, perhaps it begins to make sense. They are still confused and will veer between naivety and bitterness, growing in confidence on the one hand, proclaiming the resurrection, refusing the take up arms, but still veering to bitterness.

(surely gentiles, especially soldiers can't really have the gospel.) It will take half of the book of Acts for them to grasp the consequences of Jesus' new realism and realise even a Roman army officer like Cornelius can have the gospel. But as they're learning, body-bread, wine-blood, consumed in remembrance of him, will gather meaning. It holds the two nearly right, very wrong visions of nostalgic self-deception and bitter mistrust. It draws from each any glimmer of truth and works them into a new realistic, unerringly hopeful vision.

On a weekend like this 100th anniversary of the Armistice, we are at risk of remembering badly, either in chest swelling nostalgia, ugly and disrespectful of the sacrifices made; or in nursing bitterness, creating caricatures in order to perpetuate mistrust and legitimise conflict. It matters not only as history, but for the conflicts of the present and future. The nurture of caricature is a deadly curse in our conduct towards the gangsters we hurry to call terrorists. The wilful naivety is a deadly curse in our sale of arms to others we call crown princes.

After the Armistice, a hundred years ago, victors thinking they unassailably remember well, the treaty of Versailles carefully stoked mistrust. It continued to identify Germany as enemy, war, punishing Germany in such a way that resentment grew Hitlarian fever pitch. We should probably say "Today we remember the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the second world war." Such are the long term consequences of remembering badly.

Jesus' vision, offered to his disciples, is one that looks horror and enemy and suffering straight in the eye, holds the gaze and cannot be accused of naivety. It refuses to stoke bitterness with the horror but moves on to find life and creativity and offer blessing.

We can do it. After the second world war, rather than nursing Germany's identity as enemy Europe, with vivid realism, beheld the horror of the holocaust and up to this very week pursued people through the courts to bring them to justice. Meanwhile we have worked together to build a union that could lead to neighbourliness and now true friendship. In recent years, in England, tragically, we have nursed very bad remembering: the nostalgic kind of nationalism that looks ridiculous to everyone else, and presents as that flabby arrogance that betrays lack of imagination and confidence on the one hand, while underwriting bitterness and hate on the other. To my mind this is the worst betrayal of the sacrifices that we claim so righteously to remember. It ruins any thanksgiving we might be trying to offer.

If ever we think we can have a cosy, exclusive, nostalgic identity, the eucharistic image calls us away from naivety and reminds us of the horrific wounds. Whenever we feel entitled to bitterness, superior in our

cynicism, the sweet bread and wine calls us away from resentment to remember the healing grace of his greeting. Jesus said "do this in remembrance of me" knowing, if we do, he can help us to do all remembrance well.