

Trinity 22 Remembrance Sunday, 8 November, 2020,
Pusey House sermon by The Principal
Readings: Genesis 45.1-7, 15, Philippians 1.3-11, Matthew 18.21-end

Today is remembrance Sunday. Of course, in one sense, all our Sundays are Remembrance Sundays. We both cast our minds back, we recall, but the past is also made present to us. In Christ, the once for all becomes the always. Our remembering makes present. Also, because our remembering is a remembering in Christ, our day of remembrance is also a day of repentance.

Remembrance Sunday is not about glorifying war. On Remembrance Sunday we give thanks for those who ‘counted not their lives dear unto themselves, but laid them down for their friends’. We remember and honour the sacrifice of those who have died in the wars of the past long century. We give thanks for the present which we have received from those who have gone before us. We give thanks in particular those who laid down their lives to pass on to us something of the things which we hold dear in the present.

But because this remembering and giving thanks is a Christian remembering, we can be both honest as well as grateful. Our remembrance is always connected to a repentance. We give thanks with the patriarch Joseph, and we repent with his brothers.¹

After their father Jacob dies, the brothers come to ask forgiveness of Joseph again. He was betrayed and sold into slavery by them, and in return he saved them and fed them with the bread of life. He gives us one of the great summaries of God’s providence:

‘Fear not: for *am* I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; *but* God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as *it is* this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones.’

‘Ye thought evil against me; *but* God meant it unto good’. We are invited to find inspiration and comfort in these words. We like to think of ourselves alongside Joseph. But this only works if we are also willing to see ourselves alongside Joseph’s brothers also. Remembrance is connected closely with Repentance. To see the love of Christ, the love which we see also in Joseph, is to see our own falling short, and to see our need for love. We don’t just need forgiveness, we need to step into the love which would enable us to forgive, to choose peace and love over conflict and resentment. That takes courage. This also means that we don’t need to remember only heroism and glory when we think of those who have fallen in war. We can also look honestly and with hope at human weakness and sin, we can see futility and stupidity.

The cross of Christ at the centre of our remembering. We see in the cross human folly and cruelty, but we see also God’s conquest of sin and death. In the more evocative words of Giles Fraser, we could say that the cross of Christ enables us to ‘experience reality itself as the bearer of loving personality’.² God does not need suffering or war, and yet Christ’s arms reach out from the cross to embrace suffering and to conquer violence. Christian remembrance, looking

¹ In the Old Testament lesson we encounter the patriarch Joseph. His whole is a kind of prophecy of the life of the Lord Jesus. He is betrayed by his brothers, the very ones he might expect to love him cast him into a pit and sell into slavery. He descends first to Egypt and then to prison. Even in prison he is free among the dead, he preaches the companions God has given him. By God’s power, Joseph is raised up to become the ruler of the land. As Pharaoh’s servant, Joseph is able to save his people, to look after the brothers who betrayed him, to feed them with the bread of life.

² On worship as shaping the experience of ‘reality itself as the bearer of loving personality’, see ‘Boris Johnson doesn’t get God: This second lockdown has robbed church-goers of more than community, GILES FRASER.
<https://unherd.com/2020/11/boris-johnson-doesnt-get-god>

at the world through the lens of the cross and the resurrection, enables us to ‘experience reality itself as the bearer of loving personality’, even in the face of the horrors of war.

In the next few minutes, I propose to look at one example of the those who counted not their lives dear to themselves, and then second, to see how that example invites us both to gratitude and repentance. This also helps us to see how we might live through and in these strange times with hope.

The Bickersteth Diaries tell the story of a family caught up in the drama and horror of the first world war. Sam and Ella Bickersteth had six sons. Ella was the daughter of a fellow at Balliol College and the Professor of Sanskrit in this university. She is also said to be one of the young girls after whom Lewis Carol modelled Alice in Wonderland. Canon Samuel Bickersteth was the vicar of the parish Church in Leeds and a friend of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1914 two of the 6 sons were priests in the C of E, 5 served in or for the army, 4 on the western front. One of the brothers, a young infantry officer, Morris Bickersteth, was killed at the battle of the Somme, on the bloodiest day of English military history, 1 July 2016. As a company commander, he led the 8th and final wave of the men of his company out of a trench with the words ‘Come on lads, here’s to a short life and a gay one’. Ten yards out of the trench just over a slight rise, Morris and his companions ran into the piles of bodies of the first 7 waves that had gone before them. He was killed within a few minutes, just after sending another wounded man to safety.³

Julian, one of his brothers, was an Anglo-Catholic Chaplain who won a Military Cross for bravery. Julian describes his own experience of the Battle of the Somme:

‘I have seen sights and heard sounds the last few days which will live with me to my dying day, and filled me with an agony of sympathy for those suffering indescribably things.... I have been surrounded for three days with nothing but blood, blood, blood. Yet rising out of this sea of misery and pain, human nature, the spirit of man, has won the day. His is an immortal soul. The courage, self-sacrifice and endurance of countless numbers of these men will be an inspiration to me for all time, though I may never blot out from my eyes the hideous realities of these dreadful days.’⁴

Julian looked after the dying, cared for condemned men, heard confessions, celebrated the holy communion daily for a surprisingly large and changing contingent of soldiers. He built makeshift but beautiful chapels in tunnels or cellars, and even prepared soldiers for confirmation.⁵ He was present at the battle of Arras where C S Lewis was wounded as well as Passchendaele. His experience at Cambrai bring in November 2017 bring out some of his sharpest reflections:

‘My nostrils are filled with the smell of blood. My eyes are glutted with the sight of bleeding bodies and shattered limbs, my heart wrung with the agony of wounded and dying men’.

‘Who can help confessing that this endless flinging of metal against each other is really very foolish, and that the energy of the world today is misdirected; and yet how are we to get back to a saner view of things?’⁶

³ *The Bickersteth Diaries: 1914-1918* (Leo Cooper, 1998), p. 100. With thanks to Peter Saville for the gift of this book.

⁴ *The Bickersteth Diaries: 1914-1918* (Leo Cooper, 1998), p. 101. ‘I never realised war could be half so devilish as it is in its worst stages, and yet men do rise superior to the worst agony.’ p. 102

⁵ In 1916, 16 July-- For a chapel, ‘I got a cellar’ for up to 30 men, the altar was draped with an army blanket, 6 candlesticks, a picture of the Saviour hung on the wall, a fair linen cloth spread over the altar, two lanterns cleaned and fitted with candles as sanctuary lamps. He continued this kind of practice all through the war.

⁶ pp. 220, 221. Cambrai, Julien’s division had been in the thick of the fighting for some weeks, entry for 3 December, 1917.

‘It is hard not to yearn with an almost uncontrollable yearning for an end to these things, and to reflect that if only those who have the power to make peace could see or feel something of the horror of modern warfare, they would speedily come to some conclusion of this business’.⁷

Remembrance Sunday is not about glorying in war. But it would be arrogance and blindness to enjoy our freedoms and prosperity and to sneer at those who were willing to die for them. We don’t need to take a ‘God was on our side’ attitude, we don’t need to vilify those on another side, to see a connection between the sacrifices of Julien and his brothers and the good things we hold dear. In one sense our remembering is local or national. We give thanks as belonging to a particular people and history. At the same time, our Christian remembering gives local and particular remembering a more universal and all-embracing character. We don’t remember only those who died for causes or principles which we hold dear. We can give thanks for whatever good was in the sacrifice of the fallen, and we pray that the evil we find on all sides may have a place with the repentance of Joseph’s brothers. In the same way, we don’t need to turn away or downplay Julien’s expressions of futility and unnecessary suffering alongside his witness to a courage and hope which rises above the horrors.

We look back in fellowship with Joseph who sees God conquering sin and death. We look back also in fellowship with Joseph’s brothers. We recognize our fellowship with the resentment, envy, arrogance, and greed which thrust Joseph into the pit and sold him into slavery. We recognize that this is enough out of order in our hearts to start another world war. That repentance is a key part of what makes this day a day of hope. Our day of remembrance is also a day of repentance.

I feel sick at heart that our whole community is not permitted to gather together in this chapel to hear the word of God together, to pray and worship together, and to come together to the new Joseph to be fed together with the bread of life. This is a heavy blow. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York, as well as the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, and other religious leaders, have asked the government to reconsider the ban on public worship. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster wrote that the ban on public worship demonstrates ‘a fundamental lack of understanding of the essential contribution made by faith communities to the well-being, resilience and health of our society’.⁸ It has to be said that many faithful disciples of Christ would disagree with this. Some of those who voted for the ban on public worship did so with a very heavy heart because they thought it is a necessary from a faith perspective, not just a political one. On the other hand, when I read the account of Fr Julian Bickersteth and the soldiers who worked with him transforming dark tunnels or cellars into beautiful chapels, converting lanterns into sanctuary lights and horse blankets into altar coverings, one gets the impression that he and the soldiers who were gathering together with him, sometimes under fire, had a sense of the preciousness and life-giving character of worship. Fr Julian speaks especially about the hunger of soldiers who faced death for the bread of life, and their eagerness in seeking this medicine of the soul.

But if there is ‘a fundamental lack of understanding of the essential contribution made by faith communities to the ... health of our society’ isn’t that in itself another reason for repentance? Do we show the world as we should what the love and wisdom of Christ looks like in our lives? In a letter to the clergy of the Church of England, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, with the Bishop of London, have invited us to make this month a month of special prayer:

⁷ Diary entry or letter from July, 2017, p. 204, expressing similar sentiments to the December entries.

⁸ <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/statement-on-the-four-week-national-lockdown-and-a-call-to-prayer/>

‘During this second lockdown we invite you to fast in a way appropriate to you as well as pray for our nation every Thursday, for its leaders, its health and essential services and all those who suffer.’⁹

During the next month, we will do our best in this chapel to be a focus of the call to prayer. We will offer some resources on our website to help our community to pray together in hope, and to suggest how we can respond to the Archbishop’s call. We will be live-streaming services and updating the website regularly. The website and the sacristan’s emails will offer this information.

Some people will not wish to join on-line worship. For some, worshipping via an on-line connection seems alienating or contrary to the incarnational character of public worship. That is understandable, and we all must make up our mind. However, we do know that we are called to some rhythm of prayer.

In the Gospel, the Lord Jesus tells St Peter to forgive not seven times, ‘but until seventy times seven’.¹⁰ This lesson about forgiveness is challenging enough. However, this instruction also encourages us to see the temptation that we face in very ordinary sources of discouragement or frustration. We may find all kinds of reasons to decide that it’s not worth persevering, or reasons to give up or not bother. These may be precisely the little crosses, the little humiliations, which we can recognize as temptations to turn away from hope, or prayer, or community. Instead, we are invited until seventy times seven to choose the better way, to choose hope, to choose Christ who has already chosen us. St Paul describes this for us in the epistle in words which are both practical and full of hope: ‘And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgement; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.’

We don’t just need forgiveness, we need to step into the love which would enable us to forgive, to choose peace and love over conflict and resentment. This is the work of repentance. Repentance is not a grovelling or sad surrender of dignity. To repent is to turn in hope toward the all-conquering love of Christ, a turning which enables us to ‘experience reality itself as the bearer of loving personality’. St Paul invite us to connect all our remembering with the good work of Christ, working for good, to save much people alive:

‘I thank my God upon every remembrance of you ... being confident of this very thing, that he who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ’.

⁹ <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/letter-clergy-archbishops-justin-welby-and-stephen-cottrell-and-bishop-london>

"Bearing in mind our primary vocation as the Church of Jesus Christ to pray and to serve, we call upon the Church of England to make this month of lockdown a month of prayer.

“More than anything else we know that we are in the faithful hands of the risen Christ who knows our weaknesses, tiredness and struggles and whose steadfast love endures for ever...”

“During the first lockdown we cheered for the NHS every Thursday. During this second lockdown we invite you to fast in a way appropriate to you as well as pray for our nation every Thursday, for its leaders, its health and essential services and all those who suffer.”

¹⁰ In response to a similar request, St Luke tells us that the apostles say simply ‘Lord, Increase our Faith’. Before a vision of the love of Christ, a love which is purely positive and creative, all-conquering, a love without any resentment or reaction, the disciples in every age have said, Lord, increase our faith.