

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 14 November 2021
11.00am Rob Thompson

Remembrance Sunday *Hinde Street Methodist Church*

1 Samuel 1:4-20 and Mark 13: 1-8

Three years ago, in honour of the centenary of the Armistice, the end of the Great War of 1914-18, the Imperial War Museum held a series of exhibitions. There was one particular exhibition which stood out for me. It stood out because, unusually for an exhibition, there was nothing to see. The room was dark, with just a few spotlights, and there was nothing to see, only voices to hear. On a rolling loop, dozens of testimonies from those who lived through the First World War were played. They were just short extracts from the Imperial War Museum's archive of oral history, snippets of memories, momentary glances at history, but one extract has remained with me. It was that of Vera Waite from Blackwell, a small village near Bristol, who was aged just 14 on Armistice Day 1918. Vera's voice said this:

Every Sunday in church, and I went regularly then, I used to follow Mr Caldwell as he read out those names. Every Sunday he'd read out the names of the men that were killed, and I used to read the next one with him, you know, as he was saying it, to myself, I was saying the next one. I knew every one as they were going to be said. And I can remember a good many of them now.

Vera was interviewed by the Imperial War Museum in 1988. So, those names were held in Vera's memory for seventy years. Vera's testimony stood out to me because I can picture the scene so well. I can't imagine what it was like to huddle in a trench that was filled with water and mud and worse. I can't imagine the crowds in the recruiting offices, or the loneliness of sentry duty, or the sound of a mallet on a wooden cross. Unless we ourselves have been a witness, I don't think any of us can truly begin to imagine the experiences of the wars we remember today. But we do know what it is like to sit in a chapel and listen to names. For we have done so even this very morning.

Today, during our act of remembrance, we heard the names of the men of this church, our church, who were killed in the two great wars of the last century. None of us here today lived through the Great War, none of us can remember the men whose lives we commemorate. All that is left are their names. And we are very grateful to Alan Brooks and his brother Stephen who researched some of the lives of those of the First World War, whose names are commemorated on our memorial board: the sons of coachmen, of bakers, waiters, fishmongers, and chimney sweeps, their biographies are snapshots of a world totally different to our own and yet just the same, and the lists of their grave sites—for those whose graves are known—could trace a map of the frontiers of the Great War, from the Somme and Ypres on the Western Front, to Thessalonica in Greece.

On Remembrance Sunday, we might ask the question: why do we remember? Remembrance is a firm part of our national culture: the Royal British Legion, whose Poppy Campaign has done so much to preserve memory of the 1914-18 war and subsequent conflicts, commemorates its 100th anniversary this year. The permanent Cenotaph on Whitehall, likewise, is 100. And it is a mark of the importance of remembrance in our national culture that Her Majesty the Queen has affirmed its significance by returning to her public appearances today of all days.

But remembrance is more than a national rite of passage, a date in the calendar, not least because memory is—for those who mourn—a persistent presence, and not an annual one-off. But even more so, remembrance is a Biblical commandment, a sacred duty. Our scriptures and our liturgies are filled with references to the importance of memory: ‘Remember you were slaves in the land of Egypt’, ‘Remember you are dust’, ‘Do this in remembrance of me’.

Why remember? There are two reasons I’d like to explore this morning. Firstly, we remember as an affirmation of God’s love for us and for everyone. Secondly, we remember as an affirmation of God’s enduring presence.

Firstly, we remember as an affirmation of God’s love for us and for everyone. We began with names, and names are at the heart of our remembrance. What is the importance of naming those whom we remember? Well, in the reading we have heard this morning from the Hebrew Scriptures, Hannah made a plea to God, a plea for a son. And she said this: ‘Remember me.’ Remember me. There is a communion between the individual and God through the process of remembrance. And what was the evidence by which we know that God did remember Hannah? By what sign is marked Hannah’s faithfulness and God’s love? It is the naming of her son: Samuel, and Samuel means ‘name of God’. A name is thus the symbol of God’s personal relationship with each of those created in His image. And this tradition is at the heart of our practice as Christians to this very day. When we are baptised we are named to God. God names us and by our names we are blessed as His children.

So, the necessity of remembering is not just a Biblical commandment which appears throughout the Scriptures. To remember is to affirm our knowledge of each person’s worth, dignity, individuality, the truth of their birth and the confirmation of the fact that they are known by God for evermore and loved by God no matter what.

It is in this context that I think we can appreciate the importance of the names on church memorial boards, because not every name on these boards has a known grave. Not every one of them has a gravestone where their name and regiment are carved in stone for eternity. They include at least five men from our own memorial board: Victor Evan Money and Arthur Charles Money (brothers), Herbert Towler, Percival William Corderoy Northcroft, and Mark James. The supposedly unknown dead, whom their comrades never found or whose remains could not be identified: they too were known to their family and they were known to God and so the reading and the preserving and the remembering of their names in the sacred spaces of our chapels and churches is all the more necessary. Each of those names we have heard today are more than gilt letters on a memorial board. They are the affirmation of God’s undiminished relationship with each one of us, not just the living on this earth but all the saints who have prayed in His name since time began. The gravestone of one serviceman

killed in Normandy in July 1944—Gunner A. F. Darvill of the Royal Artillery—includes the epitaph: ‘To the army he was just a number, to me, his wife, he was all the world.’ To God, this is the truth for each one of us.

There may be other names that we each remember today. I remember Albert Stocker. Albert’s name cannot be found in the history books, nor do I believe there is a plaque to his name. But I knew Albert, and so I remember his name. Albert sat behind me on the third pew at Temple Methodist Church in Taunton, week on week out. Each week he would wear his blue jacket, on the breast of which was stitched in gold thread the badge of the Somerset Light Infantry, and every Remembrance Sunday, Albert would wear the blue, and red, and orange ribbon of the Burma Star, the campaign medal awarded to soldiers who fought in the jungles of the furthest outreaches of the British Empire. What this gentle man of the West Country must have seen as an ordinary rank-and-file soldier in the horrors of war in the Far East, were probably too painful to recount. But Albert—like me—was a proud Boys’ Brigade lad, so it was, perhaps, always going to be the case that I would find him a quiet inspiration. His persistent faith in attending church every week and saluting the names on Remembrance Sunday were markers of a gentle kind of unbreakable love.

So, we remember, and we remember because of God’s named love for each one of us.

Albert brings me to the second reason why I think we remember. We are called to remember as an affirmation of God’s enduring presence.

In our Gospel reading this morning we heard Jesus’ statement which so shocked His disciples and those who heard him: that ‘not one stone’ of the Temple in Jerusalem ‘will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’ It was a shocking statement because the Temple in Jerusalem represented God’s presence with His people on earth, the destruction of the Temple was akin to the destruction of God Himself. Mark’s account of the Gospel, written just after the real-life destruction of the Temple and the enslavement of the people of Jerusalem by Titus’ Roman legions, speaks of an unimagined catastrophe that had befallen the people of God, just as the increasing number of names read out week on week in chapels across this country like Vera Waite’s and this one would have been akin—to those who heard them—to the ending of their world.

The challenge that Jesus sets us in Mark’s account of the Gospel is to remember these destructions, and to recognise in them that when we find ourselves furthest from home, when peace is broken, when the bonds between people shattered, when war remains the only option left in order to defeat evil, though we might think we are furthest from God, we are in fact as near to Him as we will ever be. For God has experienced world-shattering catastrophe too, God knows the sound of the mallet on the wooden cross, and these are the ‘birth pangs’ which contain within them the hope of transformation.

The Reverend Murdo Ewen Macdonald was a Church of Scotland minister who served during the Second World War as an army chaplain. In late 1942 he was wounded and taken prisoner in North Africa. He spent the rest of the war in Prisoner of War camps, including the famous Stalag Luft III, site of the so-called ‘Great Escape’. Padre Mac, as he was known to the men in the camps, missed the Great Escape because he gave up his opportunity of

freedom to another man so that he could move to a different part of the camp—the compound for American officers—where they were without a chaplain to support them. Two and a half years was a long time to be imprisoned without knowing when the war would end, and the presence of a minister in the camp was not just a source of strength and morale for the men so far from home, but just as importantly a reminder of the persistence of God’s presence in the darkest of periods.

I’d like to share with you a story from Padre Mac’s memoir:

Employing sundry devious means, the Americans maintained close contact with the British in the North Compound [...] The most effective one was Gaelic, my mother tongue [...] Every day, the Gaelic speaker in the North Compound, Corporal Peter MacNeil, would come over to the wire at staggered times and give me a digest of the BBC News in Gaelic. Later on I would translate it into English for the Americans. It was thus we heard the momentous news of D-Day, the Allied landing on the beaches of Normandy. At about 6.00am a fellow soldier shook me awake and shouted in my ear, ‘The Scotsman is at the wire. He is very excited and wants to speak to you.’ I pulled on my jersey and trousers and ran over to the wire. Peter shouted two words in Gaelic, ‘Thanig iad,’ translated, ‘They’ve come’. I turned on my heels, woke the South Compound, and pandemonium erupted. Men leapt up into the air and, shouting and crying, rolled in wild abandon on the ground. They knew that victory was in sight and that deliverance was around the corner. Over the years, I have used this incident to illustrate what the Christian message really is. Properly understood, it is neither a philosophy nor an ideology. It is not even a morality. Essentially the Christian message is good news. It tells us of something stupendous that has happened, the coming of God in Jesus Christ. An event more momentous and far-reaching than D-Day in Normandy. The Greek word is ‘Kerugma’. It can be translated as the proclamation of a world-shaking event.

That is the basis of our Christian faith. That is the basis of our Christian faith: the proclamation of God in the catastrophes and darkness of our own time: the proclamation of a world-shaking event, the revelation of God Himself in our lives, the hope that allows us to live another day, the hope that the sound of the mallet on a wooden cross is not the end. That, too, is why we remember.

One final illustration: when I was preparing for this sermon, I picked up my copy of Vera Brittain's *A Testament of Youth*, her memoir of the Great War and her brother, Edward, and her fiancée, Roland, who were both killed. I was moved to find that at the very beginning of the book she includes a reading from Scripture, a quotation from the Book of Ecclesiasticus, which I found particularly pertinent for our theme this morning:

Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise. But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. But these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten... Their descendants stand by the covenants; their children also, for their

sake. Their offspring will continue forever, and their glory will never be blotted out. Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives on generation after generation. The assembly declares their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise.

‘Remember me’ the Scripture says.

Every name is known and remembered to God: Hannah and her son Samuel; Vera Waite and the men of her chapel; the men of this church who are commemorated on our memorial board; Padre Mac and the prisoners to whom he ministered; Vera Brittain, and Edward and Roland; Albert Stocker, and the names of the saints we each remember today. Our calling is to join God in His eternal act of remembrance: to read, hear, listen, and to keep the faith.

And in remembering we can also—as Padre Mac did in Stalag Luft III on D-Day—bear witness: bear witness to the revelation of God which above all else contains the greatest victory, the victory of faith, which is the transformative power of His redemption, and which is the purest, indestructible, everlasting love of a God who hears us as we say ‘remember me’ and who names each one of us as His own.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

14 November 2021

Robert Thompson