Reverend Canon Paul Ormrod’s Homily

Remembrance Sunday 2018

Have you had that experience of getting to the top of the stairs, or walking into a room and then not being able to remember why you went there in the first place? It happens to me a lot.

And in other ways too. Like assuming that it´s Thursday when in fact it´s Friday. Or calling someone Richard when their actual name was Robert for an embarrassingly long time. Or getting really annoyed with myself because I can´t find my keys.

We all know that memory is fickle and often it´s hard to maintain. When I was at school and learning languages, I seemed to be able to remember vocabulary quite easily. Coming back to learning Spanish has been much more of an effort.

In our Google age, the smartphone has become a memory substitute. Come on. Admit it. Who hasn´t been part of some conversation when you´ve Googled the forgotten words of a song, or what actor played who, or what the score was in some famous match.

And then memory across generations gets even more problematic. Sometimes it´s flawed, even children and grandchildren can´t remember. How much more so when the memory is stretched across four or five generations?

We pause today to remember the guns falling silent exactly one hundred years ago. We strive to remember what that meant to our forebears. The bells of peace peeled out. And we need imagination to recover what a relief that was.

Naming was a way of dealing with the horrors of war loss. Within a very few years communities throughout Europe had a war memorial that named those who had been killed. Looking now at the huge versions, like those in the battlefields of Flanders, we quake at the enormity of the loss involved.

Though sometimes it’s the small ones that really bring it home. In the graveyard of the church in Liverpool, England, where I was Vicar before I came to Madrid, there is an unusual cross of remembrance. The cross commemorates officers of the local Liverpool regiment who died during the First World War. It originally stood in France near where the men died but after the Armistice the cross was brought to Liverpool by relatives of those who died. On the cross is a plaque with 8 names on it. The town would have had a population of around 5,000 at that time. Every one of those named on the plaque would be well known in the town. The names assert the value of their lives.

But the names on that plaque and countless others like it, can´t be just names. They represent people. Somebody´s husband, father, son. In labouring, in loving, in learning, in living they were as we are. If you have a family connection to one of those names, then perhaps a faded photo, or an old watch and chain will help make the link. If not, then our own experience of life, helps us appreciate the value of each life named. We sing the praises of illustrious men, not in any vainglorious way but as a valuing of their particular lives so tragically lost.

Less than a fortnight after the guns ceased, Lloyd George, then Britain´s Prime Minister, said this.

“I cannot think what these men have gone through. I have been there at the door of the furnace and witnessed it. But that is not being in it. And I saw them march into the furnace.”

Furnace was an apt description. It seemed that so many of those who fought had been reduced to nothing more than fuel to a consuming fire that could never be controlled. Looking back, we may be tempted to consign our Armistice thoughts to the listing of horrors in a century full of horrors.

True enough but it’s not good enough today. Today we shine a light in the darkness of what had happened and assert that not one of those lost fell unnoticed by God. We name them personally because of the cruel fate that denied them their personhood. So much more valued than sparrows, despite the muddy circumstance that denied that. And the First World War ended.

Armistice.

We rejoice that at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month the guns were silenced. The furnace was fully extinguished. So, remember what you will, but remember.

And today, on this significant anniversary, I want to put in a plea for what I’m going to call good remembering. There are those who say that a constant looking back to the wars and disputes of the past as a way of forming our sense of remembering and justifying our current position, is not a good idea. It is, however, the way of remembering that we so often embrace because it gives us a collective sense of safety and identity.

The 16th century battle of Lepanto when the expansion of the Ottoman empire into Europe was halted, is still commemorated. The Scots honour William Wallace, the French honour Joan of Arc. Many British people have a view of the European Union based on sentiments derived from the Second World War. The trouble with all of this way of remembering is twofold. One, is that it looks to a past which pits us against them. And secondly, much of this remembering is based upon negative, even hate filled sentiments, which are ill suited to building a positive present and hope for the future.

Good remembering has two essential elements. We remember in order to understand. Battlefield tours feature increasingly in holiday brochures. Many people now visit the battlefields not only of two world wars but also of those of Crimea and Waterloo. There can be a macabre aspect in seeing where people fought and died. A more positive approach is to understand the conditions in which they existed, the hazards and hardships that surrounded them even before they went into battle. The sacrifice for many was not only of their lives but of the decencies of everyday living. We remember in order to understand. And secondly, we remember in order to look forward. The First World War was supposed to be the war to end all wars. That well-meaning slogan was to become a message of resentment directed against the political leaders of the time. Even now, our good intentions of peace and prosperity for all have proved to be nothing more than dreams. We are still assailed daily by wars and rumours of wars around the world.

As we remember, we have to look forward in faith and hope. Not many things in this life come without anyone working for them. And certainly peace does not come without much work, without many people working for it, working together for it, even fighting and dying for it.

That’s why it’s important to remember Jesus’ words. When he says that the peacemakers are indeed to be called the children of God. Jesus worked and suffered and died to bring peace and those who follow his example are truly children of God.

We can spend a lot of time talking about peace as if peace were an ultimate end in itself. But peace is not just the end of war and conflict. Peace means more than that.

Peace means justice and freedom and dignity.

Most of us here this morning come from peaceful countries. And yet we can’t say that everyone in those countries is living in a peaceful relationship with their neighbours and their God. Suffering continues and people do not have peace in their lives. There are still those who are poor and not supported. Those who are ill and not cared for. Those who are homeless. Those who are abused. Those who live in fear. For these and for many more people there is no peace. So none of us can rest secure even if we live in peaceful countries. We have a duty to carry on a fight for justice so that our world becomes a place free from fear of violence and crime and a place of justice in which all can live in dignity.

If peace is to mean anything, then it must mean a world in which everyone is reunited with each other and with their Creator.

When we come here on Remembrance Sunday, in a sense there is so little that one can say. So many reminders of what there is still to do. It is not a time to express opinions or make judgements. We meet here in the aftermath of two world wars. And we must never forget those, or the many wars since, because by remembering them, we all remind ourselves that they must never happen again. Today is not the day for words of celebration, or words of condemnation.

Today is a day for remembering, good remembering.

A day of strengthening our resolve to work for peace and justice in our world.

And a day for silence.