

Editorial: Volume 10

Remembering Well

The Very Revd Canon Prof. Martyn Percy

Welcome to this 10th edition of *Orientis Aura*, in which our articles revisit the past the past to try and make sense of the present. That is the work of history. It is also the work of theology. It is also the work of the church.

For many Christians, November is the Season of Remembering. Not only the fallen of two World Wars and other conflicts, but also, through the festivals of All Souls, All Saints and other times. This is the diminutive gap between the living and departed. This is for moments when we pray for those we love yet see no longer; for those whose lives have inspired us on our Christian journey; and for those who still grieve, even as they remember.

But sometimes our memories don't quite work. We forget. Or, we somehow misremember. Let me give you an example of misremembering that sits within the present. It concerns an individual from Mosul, Iraq. His parents died young, and his uncle and aunt raised him. Or at least so he was led to believe. When they were too old to care for him anymore and he was still young, they told him they were not his aunt and uncle. They had found him abandoned on the street, felt compassion, took him in, and cared for him as their own.

But now they were too old to look after him. Nobody else could or would. So, they told him to stow away on a container ship, bound for London. "Someone will look after you there," they said, "people in London are *very* kind."

So, he stowed aboard a ship and set sail, landing months later at Tilbury Docks. He sneaked off the ship at nightfall, and in the morning, still sitting on his little suitcase, dreadfully and fearfully alone, a family having a day out found him. They took him home, fed him, and gave him a spare room in their attic. They thought it was just temporary until he got housed properly. But such a *kindness*.

Do you remember this story? Perhaps another tale of migrants and illegal immigrants? But apart from changing two details – the place he came from, and the place he landed – this is the back story to *Paddington Bear*. It is the story of how Paddington came from Peru to live with the Brown family. Did you remember it? Can we re-remember this tale?

This is relevant to the rather strange gospel reading today. If someone has been married many, many times, what relationship counts and what memories are important once we get to heaven? Are the other marriages to be forgotten, and only one upheld as the true one, with the best memories? Jesus answers with care. In heaven, your memories and relationships here will not matter. We will all be re-membered – put together – differently.

The Christian Season of Remembrance is incredibly rich in stories and histories: the living departed. Remembering is not a dry duty. When we re-member, it leads to review and reform. In the act of recollection, we pledge ourselves anew to one other, and to God. Remembrance is an imaginative form of recollection that reshapes our world for the better.

So, whether we remember the saints who inspire us, those who gave their lives for their country, or those whom we mourn, remembering the dead is also about facing the future – facing the task of living anew tomorrow, in the light of those who have gone before us. It is about hope and promises of recommitment. Those we cherish and remember still ‘glow like sparks in the stubble’ (*Wisdom* 3:6). They stoke the embers of our faith, so that our hearts are rekindled with a fire of love for Christ and for God’s world.

Every year, we used to go as a family to Pembrokeshire in Wales for a vacation. One of our favourite places was Solva, a tiny village at the mouth of a bay that opens into the Irish Sea. At the top of the hill on one side of the bay is a war memorial. It, like many others, lists the names of the dead, and in most cases, it is not difficult to see that even such a small community as Solva must have lost several members from each family.

We can barely begin to imagine the scale of grief and devastation such conflict would have evoked. To lose one son is bad enough. But three or four, together with uncles, brothers and husbands, is almost beyond imagination. Of such losses, holocausts are born.

But the purpose of memorialisation is not to glorify the dead. It is, rather, to speak to the living. It says, although these people have gone, they are not forgotten, for we need to remember their story to make our own lives more complete. Moreover, memory can help us to become better people.

How can this be? Remember the words of Jesus in the gospels: ‘you are worth more than sparrows, and even the hairs of your head are numbered’. Jesus’ words are a reminder that God pays careful and loving attention to the details of

our lives: to each life and its story. Yours and mine. The child who dies in infancy. The youth who dies heroically, or perhaps pointlessly, on the battlefield. The parent who grieves alone. Nothing escapes the loving eye of God. Even though someone may be no more than a date, surname and an initial on a war memorial, or a number and rank amongst a sea of white crosses in some foreign field, God will not forget you. You are never overlooked.

And if God will not forget an individual, neither should we. Remembering the dead is a way of paying mindful, compassionate attention to the lives of others. So, those apparently pointless long lists on memorials demand our attention, because behind the superficial experience of reading such registers, we can begin to learn to engage with what those names meant: who they were, who they loved, how they felt, and who loved them back.

So, to re-member means just that: to put back together again. To take the 'dis-membered' and rediscover their proper life and identity. To take those 'dry' inventories, records and rolls on graves and memorial tablets, and imagine the real lives and loves behind them.

To re-member, then, is to engage in an activity that remakes us. By recollecting and recalling, we make and pledge ourselves anew to each other, and to God. So, remembering is not a dry duty. It is a vital and hopeful form of recall that reshapes us for the better. So, remembering the dead is all about facing the task of living anew. Today is about hope and about recommitment.

However, there is a world of difference between *reminding* people of the past and *remembering* it. Reminders recall, and can all too easily lead, if one is not careful, to the perpetual contemplation of pain (and the anger that evokes). The wounds never heal; they are left open and prodded and poked regularly, so that others may participate in the pain afresh.

True remembrance is different. It is a faithful and engaged act of recollection, which is both constructive for the present and hopeful for the future. Both reminding and remembering need history, but they do different things with time and memory. One will not let go of the past; the other is committed to learning from it, living by it, but not being bound to it.

I sometimes preach at the main Anglican Cathedral on Hong Kong Island, which was converted into a stable by occupying forces during the last war. It has stood here for over 175 years, watching empires come and go. The worshippers are

surrounded by the flags and memorials that speak of sacrifice and courage, love and loss, time and eternity, hopes and fears.

Yet we do not glorify the past. We live to learn from our pasts, so that as we remember, we can re-make this world of ours into something richer. So that in due course, our world may be a place of peace and hope. Heaven is a place where there are no more tears and grief, but one equal light where all can be with Christ and live as one, as God intended. So, let us remember together, so our world can learn from its past—and we can be remade for our futures.