

**Remembrance Sunday Sermon preached by The Revd Jonathan Goodall
at Chichester Cathedral – 8 November 2009**

Jonah 3.1<5, 10; Hebr 9.24<28; Mk 1.14<20

œHuman beings die only once; so too Christ, having offered himself only once to bear the sin of many, will manifest himself a second time, Š to those who are waiting for him, to bring them salvation.¹ Heb 9.27<8

A quarter of a century ago, there would have been many people who would have said that by the end of the century Remembrance Sunday would be a thing of past generations, for whom the memories of war, previously vivid and personal, were fading away. Surely nobody would want to pursue this archaic observance very much longer? And yet, as we shall mark in a live broadcast service from Westminster Abbey on Wednesday, we are now honouring the final passing of a whole generation who fought and survived the Great War, who fought and survived in fewer numbers the second great war, and who out of the ashes of both tried to rediscover, to heal and to build up in a phrase we all learnt from them a better world, a world worth fighting for.

So in the last decades of that generation's life we have seen this remembrance observance, not only survive, but grow in emotional force and popular recognition in many ways. A younger generation, that remembers neither the First nor the Second World War, has grown up still believing that this is a valuable observance. And not only this. The commemoration of regional wars is also increasingly strong: young Australians' interest in the ANZAC losses at Gallipoli to take only one example. Why so? We could point to the fact that, of course, in the last quarter of a century, war has become a more immediate reality for many, once again: and we can only fall silent at the losses that our forces and families are suffering every day in our attempt to bring order to Afghanistan.

But the answer lies deeper than that. Remembrance Sunday brings to our minds a story that we want to be part of the fight for a world worth fighting for and that is of course how remembrance works in the Bible.

The Passover of the Jews is an event in which Jewish people become part of a story. They are no longer a family living in a rather prosaic world. At Passover they are caught up into the drama and the mystery of the exodus of enslaved ancestors from Egypt. Christians took this over and built upon it.

The ordinary Christian believer is caught up from the prosaic world and transported into the shoes of Mary and John on Calvary, to those of Magdalene on the resurrection morning, and those of Luke and Cleopas on the road to Emmaus. You become part of a story, the story becomes yours, comes to burn in the heart of you. And it's that sense of remembrance (which is the Church's DNA) that I believe is vivid and attractive, even for a generation for whom the actual remembering of a national conflict maybe something more remote. People

wish this to be their story, in spite of the gaps and the discontinuities and the distance in time.

But again, why so? One of my memories of being a boy in the wool valleys of West Yorkshire is the Festival of Remembrance, every November, when a whole cross section of the community seemed to flock into St George's Hall in Bradford, as they did into civic and community halls across the land: long evenings of entertainment, community singing, and prayer. There my elders and betters were celebrating at least three things. They were celebrating a half-lost sense of solidarity; they were celebrating the sense of a clear moral world; they were celebrating the dignity of shared grief.

And those three things are so deep in the human psyche that something very basic in our humanity is lost if we fail to remember. We need to know that we are not alone, that there are songs that we can sing together, literally as well as metaphorically. We need to know how to discern and identify evil, and to remember the circumstances in which a nation, a society, found itself able to discern evil and resist it. We need to know that grief can be contained, made human, made dignified by common mourning. Cut off from these acts of remembering, we are barbarians, we are less than human.

Remembrance Sunday will survive so long as people believe that humanity has to do with those things. And it belongs in the Christian Church because the Christian Church rests upon the affirmation of that kind of humanity. We celebrate it on our altars, we praise it in our saints; every building like this, in every community, is a proclamation and an enduring vision in the midst of daily life of what human beings are, what they're made for, and what they're destined for.

We believe that mutuality is the most significant thing that humans can ever experience: fundamentally, irreducibly, we are not alone, our destinies are bound up together, and there are songs (of joy or grief) that we can sing in common.

We believe as Christians that it is possible to pray for, and to receive discernment, which enables us to identify and resist evil: absolutely not because we are good, not because we are godly, but as even some of our brothers and sisters in Germany of the 1930s experienced because the gift of God to us, even in our confusion and unclarity, is still given, we are able to see gathering or open evil where it lies.

And supremely, as Christians we believe that we are free to mourn and to grieve together because our God holds our grief and contains it in the promise of resurrection.

Every person dies only once, says our epistle. We need to remember that today. No matter how war piles human deaths up together, each person's death is a

unique event, uniquely lived. And Christ's sacrifice is like that it's unique. (The Bible has no more to say about repeated saviours than it does about reincarnation.) And again as our epistle says he who died once for all has transformed the judgement we deserve, and will appear so as to save those who are eagerly waiting for him¹.

In the age that has overtaken us an age so it seems of endemic conflict and profound chaotic anxiety we need to be clear that on Remembrance Day we celebrate, not simply a few events in the past, however deep and traumatic, but that we celebrate humanity, a humanity whose face needs to be uncovered more than ever in an age of chaos and anxiety, a humanity that in God's eyes justified tossing into the offering box not merely what was dearest to him but what he needed most: God loved this humanity so much that he gave his divine Son to bitter rejection and death for it.

On Remembrance Sunday we tell ourselves that the agenda is not set by fear. The history we recall today, and the humanity we celebrate today, is a humanity with shared social values mutuality, discernment, grief and joy. There is a story we can make our own, a story we can become part of. Not simply a story of courage and dedication and devotion in our national history, but the greatest story, of a humanity touched and redeemed by the death and resurrection of God in Christ. We believe that if that is our story and our shared song, fear will not set the agenda.

When fear is allowed to set the agenda, it creates incompetence and injustice and insecurity all deep wounds in our human capacities, the kind of wounds that lead us into false and wrong decisions and hasty actions. We all know how fear works. And many in this cathedral even more in the Abbey on Wednesday will know that in times of conflict it is not fear, but prudence, reflection, wisdom and experience, that must be allowed to dictate what we must do.

Remembrance Sunday, and the Jewish-Christian heritage which has fundamentally shaped it and pervaded it, tells us what makes for life, what gives us the strength and the wisdom to resist injustice, incompetence, haste and anxiety. That's why this day can also be a Celebration Sunday of a humanity free to belong intelligently and lovingly together; with the clarity of perception of evil and destructiveness which is given to human beings by God's grace; with the possibility of grieving together, not in despair, but in hope.

We thank God for all those who have held up that vision of humanity, and we pray that it may be ours; that we may be part of Christ's story, and his future be our future, until we come with all the saints to see our humanity in the face of him whose appearing we eagerly await.

