

A reflection for Remembrance Sunday

Today, and on every Remembrance Sunday, names have a particular significance. So may I share with you the significance of a name from my own family?

A distant cousin, Lieutenant Walter Hudspith served in the Middlesex Regiment on the Western Front in the First World War. The official history of the regiment has this entry:

“At 6 a.m. the brigade paraded and advanced along the road to Pot de Vin. The head of the column, however, met with opposition from machine gun fire and was temporarily held up. The Middlesex then turned off the main road and endeavoured to work round Pot de Vin from the south. The movement progressed though under shell fire, one shell killing Lt Hudspith and two other ranks.”

What made this account so poignant was the date of the action. It was 7th November 1918. In little more than ninety hours, the Armistice would have happened. Instead of lying in a military cemetery, where a headstone bears his name, Walter, aged 27 and already a holder of the Military Cross, would have been preparing to return home to loved ones.

Names have a particular significance today.

Together with thousands up and down the country, many of us will gather this morning at war memorials with their lists of names. Men who gave their lives for their country between 1914 and 1918.

Why remember them? It may be that for some still in their communities, they were members of the family - so of course they're remembered. But what of the others, and the hundreds of thousands like them on memorials in this country and abroad; men long dead, of whom we mostly know little or nothing? Why remember them?

Perhaps it's out of gratitude for what they achieved for us. We remember, today, as a way of expressing and nurturing thankfulness - thankfulness that all these men, and those they left bereaved, made such sacrifices for us. We've all been handed a gift bought at the highest possible price.

And we remember, perhaps, as much to understand our present as to recall the past. To use Isaiah's picture from our first reading, it's as if, when we look at a ploughshare, we remember the sword it had been. And to realise not only how good a thing ploughing is, but more the peace that makes ploughing possible.

Perhaps we remember these names so as to live more gratefully in this costly and fragile peace, so as to ensure that we never belittle the price paid for it by letting these dead slip into forgotten obscurity.

But then many of those war memorials have another face or section, showing the names of others who gave their lives for their country between 1939 and 1945. Bearing witness to this terrible repetition of the sacrifice, our memorials as a whole are a reminder of men giving

their lives in the hope of victory and peace, only to have the next generation find itself once again embroiled in the same struggle.

So why, then, remember?

Perhaps as an apology. A belated apology to these men and their families, that they should have been sacrificed to the recurring evil that humanity can display. These were the ones who got caught in the cycles of selfishness and malice of our world.

And we are sorry, profoundly sorry, as we have been plunged into another conflict, and another, and another. Those men (and women) and others like them in later years have been caught up - because that, it seems, is the tragic pattern of things.

Perhaps, in other words, we remember these people, and these dreadful repetitions of war, so as to face up squarely to the darkness of our world, and to the guilt which we all bear for their deaths, because we all share in the malice and selfishness which fuel those repetitions. The writer of Psalm 130 summed it up like this: "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand?" We're reduced to silence when we look at the lists of names, the rows of gravestones, and know that the reasons they are there are still painfully apparent in our world.

Names have a particular significance today. So let's think of another list of names:

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Perez, whose mother was Tamar, Boaz whose mother was Rahab, Obed whose mother was Ruth, Jesse, David, Solomon, and it goes on.....

You'll find this list at the beginning of the New Testament, in the first chapter of Matthew. It's hardly ever read - and never features in the Sunday readings in Church. Some of the names we know much better than others. But they're names carefully remembered and preserved by the Jewish people.

Why were these names remembered?

Because in truth they're a strange mixture. Abraham the faithful, Jacob the cheat, Ruth the loyal, Solomon the wise, Amon the "evil-doer", Josiah the reformer. A strange mixture of the praiseworthy - and the rather less so.

And the mix is even more complex than that. Even the "good" names are a bit ambiguous: Abraham the faithful - who passed his wife off as his sister; David the prayerful, who had a man killed a man to get his wife; Solomon the wise - who worshipped other gods alongside the one true God. Why remember these names, and their sometimes-chequered history?

At first sight the answer is easy. The list is a family tree. It finishes: "....."and Jacob the Father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

Jesus the Christ. The anointed one. The one sent as Saviour.

Jesus, who emerges in the middle of this questionable history - who has it all there in his own family tree. Jesus, who goes his way to a cruel death at the hands of foreign soldiers.

Why remember this though?

Because it teaches us to see honestly the repeated sins and failings of humanity. The sins of the fathers being copied by the sins of the sons, as the Bible puts it.

And yet it teaches us, too, to see something infinitely better - the salvation that emerges in the middle of all that. Salvation that, even in the middle of such a mess, renews and transforms by the grace of God.

From this list, and the stories that lie behind it, we see the ways people fail, the ways that selfishness and malice show themselves again and again. It enables us to see and to name the sins of the world - things we find in ourselves, and which we see played out in one world war and then another, and conflict after conflict since.

And yet this list also teaches hope. Because it tells us of compassion, unexpected faithfulness and care emerging alongside selfishness and malice. Wherever swords become ploughshares, wherever lives are laid down for friends, this story of God's presence in the very midst of things gives meaning to this history of sin and salvation. It teaches us to see these things as the seeds of God's gracious work growing in difficult soil, and bearing fruit – faithfulness, repentance, sacrifice, and reconciliation, even in the midst of the suffering and evils of war.

And when we turn back to the lists we began with, the lists from the war memorials, we can see in a sense the same things. Today we're reminded of the terrible repetition of the evil that mankind can do. And yet we can see the signs of God's gracious work, growing like wheat amongst weeds. We see in these names, God's work in the midst of things, however dire the circumstances may seem.

Names have particular significance today. So let us remember them, and be thankful. And let this Remembrance Sunday mark a re-dedication of our own lives – to serve the God of justice and the Prince of Peace – wherever they may lead.